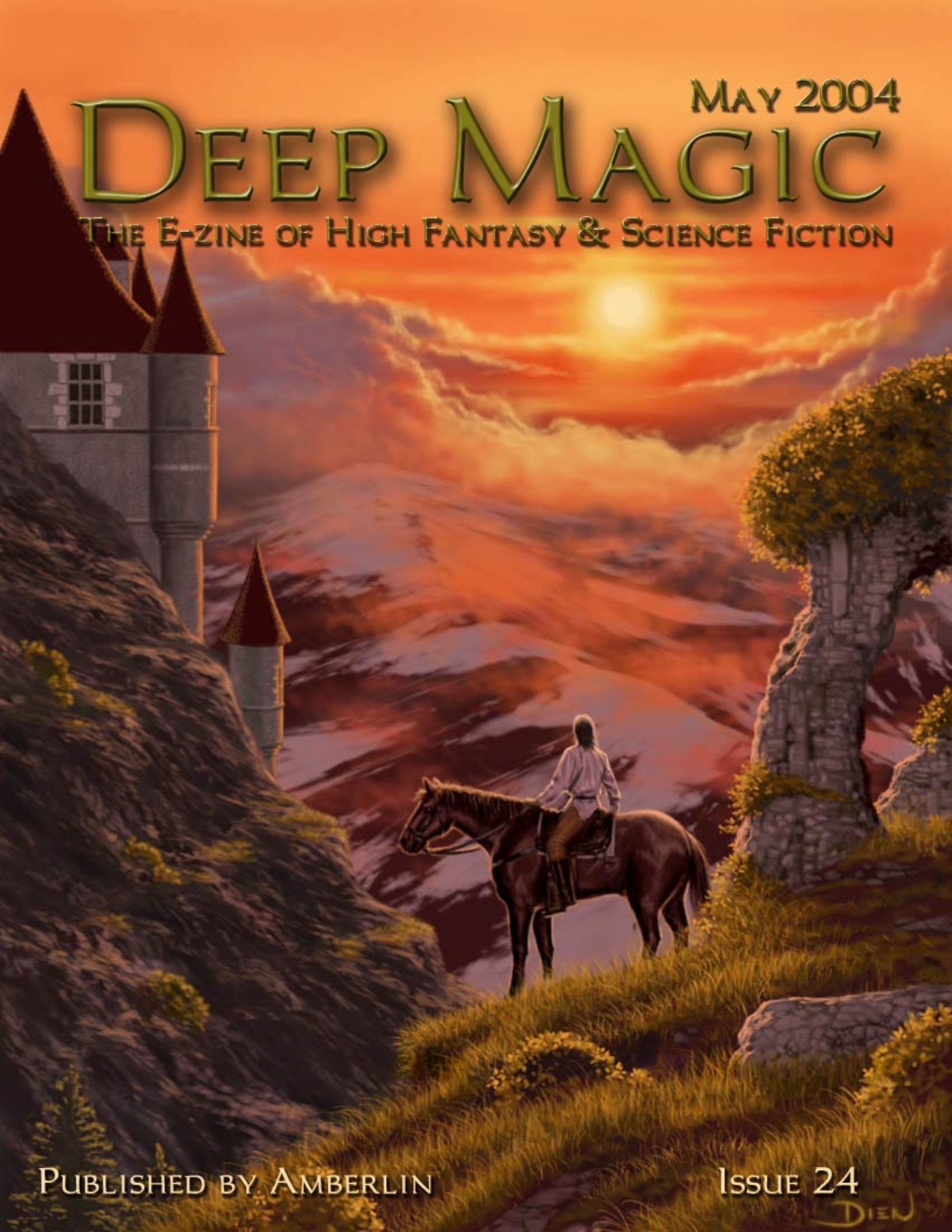
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We would like to thank our volunteer proofreaders:
A. M. Stickel
Isaac Nydegger
L. D. Reece
Mike Loos

Website: http://www.deep-magic.net

Feedback: feedback@deep-magic.net

Cover by Chris Dien
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May 2004

This past month was an exciting month at Deep Magic as we saw our subscriber and download numbers continue to increase. The launch of our new world-building project, Kenatos, has also been an immediate success. This was no more apparent than with our writing challenge, which was the most successful yet. And we're going to do something special with the results. In this issue, we printed ten of the writing challenges we received. After you read through them, return to the page where you downloaded this issue and vote in the poll. You are deciding which of these challenges (as many as you like) will be included in the official Kenatos Bestiary! For those whose challenges didn't get published, we invite you to rework the piece and submit it directly to the Kenatos project. We are always on the lookout for new creatures, races, stories, etc. for Kenatos.

This month, we hope to bring two new elements to Deep Magic. First, the Kenatos website is under construction and will hopefully be available soon. In addition, we are currently in beta for our new online submissions system. So for all you writers out there, stay tuned. You can check our forums for up-to-date information.

The writing challenge this month is another Kenatos-related exercise, so don't miss it. And don't skip the other regular features in this issue. The Geek's Guide to Grammar and Page Turners: Deep Magic Looks at Books are back for another round. So are the stories. Keri Stevenson continues her novel *Royalty of Wind, Fire, and Clay* and Bret Ludwig chimes in with a fantasy short of his own entitled *The Archer and the Dove*. Two Science Fiction pieces are also included: *A Taste of Time* by Abby Goldsmith and *The Interstellar Public Health Inspector* by Nigel Atkinson. As an added bonus, we have reprinted a chapter from Terry Brooks' new book, *Sometimes the Magic Works*, which explores the craft of writing. For aspiring writers, there are sure to be some nuggets of wisdom and advice for you.

We would like to look ahead a few months and give all you authors a chance to submit to a couple themed issues we are planning. In August, we are planning a Children's issue, so if you would like to submit a story aimed for children or youth, please do so no later than June 20. In October, once again, we will be doing our Horror issue. If you enjoy putting a little scare into your stories, send them along. Just make sure, of course, that it is still appropriate for our 'safe places for minds to wander' theme.

If you haven't dropped by our forums recently, you should pop in and say 'hello.' We've been getting more activity there as staff and readers discuss the Deep Magic issues. Registering is free, your email address is kept strictly confidential, and you can always get the latest from both staff and fellow readers.

As always, we thank you for downloading Deep Magic, and we hope you enjoy our latest offering.

All the best,
The Editors

Safe Places for Minds to Wander

Writing Challenge

Each month, Deep Magic offers an opportunity and a challenge for our readers who are also writers. Whether you are a novice who has never written a fictional paragraph, or a veteran of the publishing business, you are welcome to participate. These challenges are designed to help you develop your writing talents. As incentive, or by way of warning, we select a small number of submissions each month for publication. ***Keep in mind that our writing challenge pieces are not edited and are usually written by amateur writers.*** We invite you to take us up on this month's challenge (below) by submitting your best effort by the **15th** to writingchallenge@deep-magic.net.

May 2004 Writing Challenge

One of the staples of high fantasy is the archetypal profession of Ranger. Though called by many names in the genre (Tolkien was the first to call them Rangers, or Dunedain, Dungeons & Dragons still uses Ranger as a character class, Terry Brooks calls his Trackers, and even Greg Keyes re-invented the concept with a Holter named Aspar White in his book 'The Briar King'), the concept is the same–reclusive foresters skilled at surviving and following the trail of footprints left by others. The writing challenge this month is to re-invent this archetype again for the World of Kenatos. Give them a unique name, a reputation, and special abilities. Create a story about one dealing with the wilds of the World of Kenatos. We will publish the best entries in Deep Magic and have the readers vote for their favorite, the best of the best, that will be used in Kenatos in the future.

Selections from the April 2004 Writing Challenge

All Creatures Great and Small
The Harvestine
Keebuls
Letali
Stone-creeper-beast
The Cala'til
Beware Of the Forest That...
Grey Cristeset
The Monster Solitude
The Elknave

The above stories were selected from the submissions we received this last month. As a refresher, here is the writing challenge from last month:

This month we have announced a new world-building project called Kenatos, and we are looking for input from you, our readers, to populate it with nasty creatures. The writing challenge for this month is to submit a monster/creature/phenomenon that you would like to inhabit the world of Kenatos. Those submissions we accept will be posted in next month's issue, as well as a new website that we are creating for this project. What we ask is that you create something original, not a monster taken from Dungeons & Dragons or Lord of the Rings (or any number of fantasy worlds). You can use an on-line bestiary for ideas on how to format your entry. We are not looking for stock monsters you find in everyday fantasy books (like dragons or griffons or fairies), but new inventions that will thrill or terrify us. The intent is to create a paragraph or two, as if written by a medieval monk, describing the creature and its habitat. Keep your submission to 500 words.

All Creatures Great and Small

By Ally Wrenn

Yesterday, as I walked in the woods on the outskirts of Havenrook for my meditation period, I came upon an odd sight. There before me stood a child, no more than three or four, his attention such that he faced away from me. He swayed slightly, as children are wont to do when fascinated by something. The child proceeded to bend down upon hands and knees, his face still away from mine. I genuflected to better watch while he raised first one hand, set it down and raised the other. Setting that hand down, he raised one knee, continuing in the same pattern as his hands, letting it touch the ground before raising the other knee. The hand he had begun with rose, following the setting down of that same knee. I thought he would start his strange motions over, but he paused, setting the first hand on the ground and picked that same hand up again.

I stood, lifting my robe and creeping forward, so as not to startle the child, intrigued by his queer behavior. Imagine my horror when I glimpsed the creature he mimicked. There, on an old rotted log, skulked a *nockwhil*. My first impulse was to crush the offensive creature, to squish and stomp it beneath my sandals. But I recalled my teachings, that all creatures—great and small—hold a place in this world. My fear and disgust grew as I watched the five-legged insectoid. Two appendages on either side and one behind, thought to be a stinger when first discovered. The fifth leg actually helped it move after it fed and aided in building its cocoon when it came time for the *nockwhil*'s metamorphosis. It had the characteristic hard, metal-shaded covering, shiny silver-green over its soft, yellow-brown underbelly. The head was unremarkable in appearance, a bulky night-blue lump with ant-like eyes. But it wasn't the head people feared. The underbelly held two openings, one to secrete its paralyzing toxin, the other to gnaw away the flesh to its fill.

The sequence of the vile creature's attack I shall relate now: first, the small area where the *nockwhil* intends to feed goes numb, and then the vile toxin spreads as it feasts, until a whole body section becomes without feeling. By the time that happens, the damage is done—the *nockwhil* has eaten a hole and is five times its original size. Eventually, the numbness spreads, leading to total paralysis that lasts two days. One creature alone will not consume all the flesh, but they have been known to mill in swarms in the lands far north and east of the Scourgelands. A ghastly death I shudder to think about—a large gaping hole where it has fed, no pain, but unable to move, helpless, for two days while the toxin runs its course and the *nockwhil* slinks away to morph.

Several races have used the *nockwhil* for tipping weapons, for in their blood is the paralyzing toxin. Their form after metamophasis is not deadly—indeed they are most beautiful and benign, their shiny covering-turned-wings that glitter in the sunlight. Rumor runs that the Empress of Boeotia fancies them.

Despite my shock at seeing one so far south, I gathered my courage. The creature could jump, but it wasn't normally aggressive, more content to scuttle away to its own safety, awaiting a time where it could unobtrusively feast on its prey. I leapt forward, grasping and pulling the child up and away. I ran then, carrying the child over my shoulder, until we came to the village where I resided. I placed the surprised and upset boy down—it only occurring to me at that moment to wonder where his parents were.

The Harvestine

By Johne Cook

Background

The earliest Kenatine records detail two things: a legend and a name.

Hunters seeking to fell the magnificent species of game in its dark glades were the first to discover this phenomenon. Their accounts detail how they came from near and far to see and kill the legendary animals but left with only nightmares to show for the journey (if they left at all). As men were less learned and more superstitious in those naive days, men came to avoid those woods leaving only the unspoken rumor—that the souls of men were harvested there. The ancient name stuck.

The Harvestine is a concept so strange that it challenges everything about us as men. Begin with language—is it "is" or "are"? Is it "it" or "he / she / them"? For that matter, is it animal or vegetable, spiritual or psychological?

What is known is very little and shrouded in whispers and frightened legends—the Harvestine phenomenon occurs in only one place, the dense forests west of Wayland between the swamps to the west and the mountains to the north. (That it is in such a remote location is fortuitous for us all.)

Once thought to be a place of madness, according to legend, the dank thicket of The Harvestine is said to emit a palpable dread that affects all men. It was undisturbed for centuries until men of faith and intellect gradually divined a series of deeper truths. One: while feeding the darker emotions of men, the Harvestine is not necessarily evil. Two: men *have* died by too much exposure to its influence (although that says more about the men that confined them there than the Harvestine itself).

The Account of Jophemus, Mentor

Jophemus himself made one last pilgrimage to confront the dark force in the Wayland Wood in a confrontation that served as the final event of his august history and provided us with much of what is known about the dread phenomenon: On arriving at last in its presence, Jophemus at length parted the ethereal veil of depression and death (felt but not seen) that kept out the weak of mind and himself approached the blackest part of that dark forest to confront The Harvestine in person, willing to suffer and die if need be, but unwilling to leave without divining its nature.

What he discovered startled even this great man, steeled as he was.

This next conclusion is appended to Jophemus' posthumous record and is the result of the combined efforts of many men and four decades' work—it is thought that the Harvestine is a sprawling carpet of deepest green with a great many small nodules, which each emit a faint yellow organic glow, giving the Harvestine the impression of having many thousands of sightless, unblinking eyes.

This is, perhaps, a defense mechanism, although its primary qualities stand to serve more than sufficiently in that regard, which is rendered by scholars in this way: the current theory

is that each tiny green node contains a single discreet thought. While the Harvestine is not, strictly speaking, thought to be sentient, it is apparently capable of broadcasting or reading any of its harvested ideas and echoes of thought, lapping like waves, at the pool of memory, a great distance with considerable speed

Moreover, it appears to be able to choose between its stores of stolen concepts and to combine them in some strange harmony so as to represent (but not depict) intelligent thought.

To be clear, it strings together mental concepts but only mimics conversation.

Thus, the singular characteristic of this phenomenon was to see the motivations of those who passed too close by, reaping those dark thoughts as a thresher would harvest wheat, and spinning them back in a cryptic rhythm of its own rendering.

As no man is truly pure of heart, no man escapes its notice or its judgment (a spiritual pun). Even stranger, God's creatures seem to ignore it (at worst) or apparently are energized by its presence (at best), thus both bringing (and repelling) the aforementioned hunters.

After spending an incredible duration with the Harvestine, even a mind and spirit like that of Jophemus was overcome, and he succumbed to its dark messages. However, Jophemus was a scholar and accustomed to observation, and he had the foresight to strap himself to his trusty burden-beast. This clever animal detected his slumping form and the tightening bonds and left The Harvestine to steadily return to the villages outside the wood. Once there, Jophemus was revived by his assistant long enough to convey his encounter, after which he died in the young stalwart's arms.

His famous assistant (whom we all know by his many later adventures) was instructed not to move until he had committed his entire account to the scrolls (a feat he immediately accomplished, amid much weeping). Strangely, the wise one had died with a wistful boast upon his lips, that he had lasted twenty incredible minutes in the presence of that awesome identity, but could have easily gone forty if he were a callow youth again.

This heresy is a source of much debate among the Brethren for which there is no consensus even these many hundreds of years later.

Today, there is a spartan whisper that some visit the Harvestine as a sort of oracle. This has not been confirmed, but if true, we are confident that no more than three souls alive today would attempt it, and two would have trumpeted this knowledge to the hills if successful. As a result, this rumor is considered to be without critical merit in these modern times.

Many contemporary thinkers discount the legend of the Harvestine, but the fact remains that to this day, no man treads the dark woods west of Wayland. If asked, the locals suggest that is because there is no reason to venture there. However, this poor servant of Our Lord God does not accept that explanation at face value and can not, in good conscience, recommend that school of thought without further investigation.

Conclusion:

We have this much information left us: the legendary Jophemus, so hale and wise, died shortly after leaving those woods, and there is no recorded evidence of any man returning whole from there since.

Keebuls
By J. T. Slane

Traveling on a deer trail in the woods northeast of Wayland. The profusion of clickadorn on the hickory trees is disconcerting. I've picked several for samples and will study the growth patterns when I return to the University. Woods teeming with egroa and gnats. Uncharted marshlands near?

Sheltered beneath a blunt-faced maple and ate the thimbleberries I'd saved from yesterday. Foliage is quickly blooming this season, revealing the signs of an early spring. Discovered a centipede in my boot this morning. Must have fallen over during the night. Strange bite mark on my left toe.

Curious. On this, my third night into these woods, I've spied a woodland creature I've never seen before. At first I thought it was a grindling, for it is short and wiry, its head the size of a ripe pinecone. When I reached for my weapon, it vanished into the woods, but curiosity drove it forward a while later. It's nearly the height of a raccoon, and stands well on hind legs. I thought it was covered in fur, but instead it had spindly scales or a leathery hide, like a gochyra's plumage. Jaw is a snout with tiny teeth. It has several protuberances along the ridges of its eyes, no discernable ears that I can make out. It studied me and then disappeared.

Happened on three more of the little creatures. Four days into the woods and not sure if they followed me. Curiously, they each carried four to five thimbleberries in their tiny hands and set them before me before scurrying off. I noticed them peering at me from behind some wickerwood trees. I ate the thimbleberries and offered them a sugared chornet from my supplies. They did not approach, but when I awoke the next morning, the chornet had been devoured.

I've decided to name these creatures 'keebuls' because of the sounds they make while communicating. They let out piercing cries as well as grunts and snorts, like a bull in a pasture. There were ten this evening, each carrying a tribute of thimbleberries. At first, I believed I only saw males, but I've found another variant without the knobbles of bone on their heads. Eating all the thimbleberries over the last few days has made me quite ill, in a delicate way. Yet they've brought the equivalent of a bushel for me. Strange creatures.

The keebuls are angry I did not eat the thimbleberries, which got spoiled during the night. Several of them screamed and huffed quite indignantly. I offered them more sugared chornet to placate them. It seemed to work.

{{account in a scarred leather tome discovered near the bones of a human skeleton overgrown with thimbleberry vines in the wilderness four days south of Havenrook}}

Letali
By David Adams

Baerote was days into the mountains that separated the feuding Dwarves of Alkire from the Gnomes of Havenrook. He had long since abandoned the worn path and blazed his trail over

the rocky terrain, searching for what he knew was hidden deep in the mountain. His Master had prepared him well for the journey, both with provisions and knowledge for what he was to accomplish.

He paused in a small valley, surrounded on two sides by steep walls of wild rock and brush, and dropped to his knees. One hand touched the ground, his dried, cracked skin barely feeling the burn of a rock warmed by the sun high overhead. Baerote closed his eyes and concentrated; then whispered the soft chant of an ancient tongue. He could feel the rock beneath him and the mountains around him. Their energy—their magic—turned to him, filling him with knowledge, with power. He focused the energy on his destination and felt it. He was close—close enough to sense a direction.

The magic of the land around him drained from his body and returned to nature, weaker than it was before his corruption of it. He shook his head. 'The Elders don't know what they're missing,' he thought to himself. With a chuckle and new energy, the Black Druid stood up and continued on his way, sure to soon complete his journey.

It was no more than three or four hours before Baerote crested a small ridge of rocks and spied what he was searching for. A small path, overgrown by short, wild brush, wound its way to the back end of a shallow valley, hidden by the sharp slopes of the mountains walls around it. The Druid carefully climbed down and followed the path a short distance to its end. A small group of withering oaks trees, unnaturally small—and unnatural in the mountains themselves—stood against the back end of the valley, resting against the mountain wall. The Druid entered the small grove, stepping cautiously—excitedly.

There it was. Just as his Master had promised. A small pool of unnaturally black water, no more than four feet wide at its center, was located in the middle of the Oaks. The pool was calm.

Baerote dropped his pack to the ground and withdrew a small carving knife. He went to the first tree and cut off a chunk, penetrating deeper than the bark. He moved on to the next tree and did the same. And the next. When he had collected bits from each of the Oaks, he knelt down beside the pool, his pack on the ground next to him. From the pack he withdrew a twig of mistletoe, two long strands of grass from the marshes of Silvandom, and other pieces of vegetation from the region. He crumbled them all up and mixed them together in a pile.

The sun was ready to set when Baerote placed his left hand on the ground. The magic was strong at the side of the pool, and he was able to use it quickly, as easily as if the magic had been within him all along. He whispered an ancient chant and, with his right hand, sprinkled the bits of foliage in the pool.

When he was done, he sat back and waited. The Master had told him it would take a while. The creature had been banished long ago, waiting for the fulfillment of the prophecy when it would once again walk the land. Baerote smiled to himself. His place of glory and power was assured, just as soon as he brought the Letali to his Master.

It was an hour before it happened. The pool let loose a bubble, then another. Baerote sat up expectantly, anticipating the creature's return. Suddenly, a head crested the surface, then a hand—or rather a claw—touched the outer edge of the pool. Then the other. As Baerote's eyes widened with pleasure, and even a little fear, the Letali climbed out of the black pool.

To call it human would be to stretch the boundaries of nature. Its head was roughly the size of that of a Gnome, its body—were it fully erect—stretching no more than five feet in length. While its limbs resembled the strong arms of a man, the front and back set were the same length, as an animal of the forest. Its skin was dark blue—possibly purple—blackened even more by the murk of the pool from where it emerged. A short coat of hair along its back was matted

down by the dark water. The eyes were what first struck fear in the Black Druid. They turned various shades of yellow and red as the creature turned its head from side to side, examining the surroundings. Then it looked at the Druid and smiled, revealing sharp, dangerous teeth and a thin tongue that flicked out in thirst or hunger.

"Greetings Druid," the Letali said, its voice dark and husky—barely human. Baerote was taken back by the language. It was the ancient language of the Druids, dead save for the use of ritual and magic.

He nodded to the creature. "You are back. I doubt my eyes and ears that you are here." The creature responded with a chuckle. The Druid continued, "Tomorrow we will return to the Master."

"What Master?" The creature hissed, taking a step toward Baerote. "We serve no Master." As it spoke, a bubble popped from the pool. Then another. Baerote turned to the pool in horror as a second Letali slowly emerged.

'Two?' He was panicking. There was only supposed to be one. Why had another come. "What do you mean?" he asked, his fear unmasked at the sight of the second creature. "You know the Master—as the prophecies foretold. You must serve!"

The second Letali smiled as it climbed from the pool. "Prophecies…such nonsense. But it served our purpose, for without it you would not be here. Surely your Master knew, or else you are led by a fool. Now sit still, so we can enjoy our first true meal in thousands of years."

The Black Druid screamed as the two Letali leaped at him with lightning-fast speed. Their powerful limbs clawed and tore at his body, ripping it apart as though it were mere leaves on a tree. It was not long at all before their hunger was satisfied. The first Letali turned to the other and spoke, "Come, Arexio, we have much to do." With that, the two bounded out of the grove on their four limbs and up the slope of the mountain, disappearing quickly over the ridge.

Stone-creeper-beast

By Sean T. M. Stiennon

In the high mountains of Alkire dwells a creature that is known to the dwarf-folk as the *rom-bu-fagleed-taur*: stone-creeper-beast, often shortened to rombuftaur or simply rombaur. This creature is perhaps the most dangerous to be found in all the mountains: sixty feet from the tips of its arms to its grasping foot claws when measured out, with skin the color and texture of dark granite. Most of that length comes from its limbs, for its body is small. Each stretching arm, which is over twenty feet, is supplied with its own heart, fed from a pair of great lungs in the central torso. The beast lives among the rocks, climbing the mountains with its four great limbs, feeding on birds, mountain goats, and dwarves. The rombaur will often hang themselves outside a dwelling–a nest, a goat-path, or the hole of a dwarf hermit–and will remain motionless and camouflaged until their prey arrives home or emerges. Then they will lunge down and swallow the prey whole in their mouth, pulling it down the throat with a series of fangs designed for the purpose.

Rombaur do not need food often, as they tend towards inactivity, and so there are few of them known to exist. Some dwarves, including the head of the mountain clan Dorik-Bal,

believe that there is some great homeland of the rombaur, which they have not yet discovered, in the highest peaks of the Alkire ranges. Sometimes they have banded together to attack dwarf villages, swinging their arms like scythes and crushing men in rows. There is one well-recorded incident in which a force of ten enormous creatures brought down the walls of the Dorik-Bal clan's fortress with hurled boulders and did immense damage to the city and its population before they were destroyed by an army of dwarves, thus contributing to the clan's beliefs. None know what motivates these attacks, for there are many easier ways for the beasts to obtain food. Since no young ones of these species have even been seen, it is widely believed among the dwarves that they are born of the stone itself, although many are inclined to agree with the Dorik-Bal dwarves in the suspicion of an unknown spawning ground.

Slowly, as the plague claims more and more dwarf lives, the rombaur are growing more common. More dwarves vanish during journeys into the heart of the mountains, and there are rumors of villages which have been annihilated by bands of the creatures.

The Cala'til

By J.G.W.

And so it was on the twelfth month of my great journey that I beheld in the forest North of Alkire, where the trees grow tall, a mighty winged beast. It came to pass, as I was wandering amongst the woods, that I spied a group of three trees curiously woven together at their high peaks to form a massive nest. The work was unlike any bird or creature I had ever heard of, and it was captivating to look upon. It was then that I heard a great crash, like the sound of a falling boulder, and a victorious high piercing screech, which filled the air with terror. Quickly running toward the chilling sound, for my curiosity far outweighed my fear, I beheld in a clearing a massive Quinaram, a lizard-like beast with five mighty horns on the forefront of its head. Above it hovered the beast's victorious hunter, a bird engulfed in golden flame with wings that spanned no less than twenty feet.

The Creature was a Cara'til, and it is said that to see one is to see death. I therefore count myself blessed to have survived to write this account. Those that brave the wilderness say the Cara'til come from the cursed Scourgelands where they live in great communities, like cities built amongst the tops of massive trees. The Cara'til have feathers of gold, orange and red, which adorn their bodies like a flowing cloak. Their heads are like that of massive eagle with a scorched colored beak and eyes that glow and sparkle like fire. Along the spine of the Cara'til lie two rows of black swept-back claw-like horns, and their charcoal-colored talons are strong enough to shatter steel. The Cara'til are formidable foes for any warrior or beast, for they can engulf themselves in an unquenchable flame that even magic cannot break, and with their eyes they shoot forth a beam like molten flame that can bore through the thickest of armor. Though their flaming gaze cannot shoot far, they still are not to be meddled with. To see beasts like these entering the realms makes me wonder if they are here to eat the dead and burn the bones of those that will fall victim to the next great plague, and therefore will not be repelled back into the cursed realm until society is strong once again.

—Brother Lomo of the house Beleck

Beware of the Forest That Makes No Noise

By Duane B. Frazure

One hot summer, when the rains hadn't come for a long while, a friend of mine named Alden and I sought refuge in the cool shade of the Stonehollow Woods. Before we entered the woods, a druid bade us to stay out until rain fell and only enter then if in dire need. We were not yet ten and the warning only stirred our desire to enter the woods.

Alden entered first and said it was fine. The trees cast dark shadows and seemed to offer relief from the drought. But something was not right. The hot summer had browned the leaves. Yet few clung to the branches of the great Cotton-Bloom trees. Even stranger was that none of the leaves littered the ground. In fact, the ground itself was bare dirt. It was Alden who noticed that no birds, butterflies, or even gnats took to flight. No creatures sang, hummed, or called out to each other. The forest was as silent as death, I thought. I wished I hadn't.

Alden had climbed the lower limbs of a Cotton-Bloom and clung on like a possum when we first saw movement in the tree high above. Alden froze at first as the brown-blotched form climbed down through the limbs like a great spider in an irregular web. It must have had six or eight limbs. Its head was long and pointed, its limbs thin and nimble.

I yelled. Alden finally jumped down, and we ran. When the creature landed on the ground, I looked up and saw that it was half as tall as a man. A scream like a whistle pierced the air and other creatures started moving down from the tops of trees. Like the first, their long limbs carried them quickly through the branches and down to the ground.

They were soon upon us.

The backs of their legs looked like hard knife-edged bone, serrated. Their faces were like a bug's, with large, predatory eyes and long, sharp, snout-like noses. I couldn't see a mouth. The one that had come down from the first tree, as best I could tell, approached Alden. I fell to the ground, crying for mercy, and buried my face in my hands. Alden started to cry out for help, but his voice halted with a sickening gush. I didn't look up for a long, long time. I just cried.

When I looked up, the creatures were gone. Alden's body sprawled on the ground, lifeless and as dry as a corn husk in autumn.

The druid was waiting for me at the edge of the woods. His look was pained and sorrowful. I wanted to burn the whole forest down. He told me he understood, but warned that the Guardians of the Trees are part of nature. He told me that they keep the forest clean by eating all vegetation. They nest in the Cottom-Blooms and eat the old leaves, making way for the new. They only bother those who threaten the trees.

However, in season of drought, the leaves of the trees die and the Guardians change. They bear a single egg in the crook of a high branch, which will lie dormant like a seed until the rains fall and the new leaves sprout. The older Guardian's body changes thereafter. Its thirst and hunger dry its skin until it is as hard as armor. They drink not only water and soft plants, but will turn to blood. When the last leaves are gone, they abandon the trees and move on to feed. They have destroyed cattle herds and have been seen as far east as the great lake.

The druid told me I was fortunate. A week later, I would not have come out.

I am an old man now and still live near the forest. In honor of Alden, I post signs about the forest and warn innocent travelers about the woods. In seasons of drought, I lock my doors.

Grey Cristeset

By Mike Loos

Cristeset are large birds of prey that inhabit the deep forests of Silvandom. They are similar to hawks, nesting in tall trees and preying on other birds, rabbits, squirrels and snakes. Different sub-species of cristeset can be identified by their distinct blue, black or grey plumage. All have keen eyesight, razor-sharp talons and hooked beaks. The smaller blues and blacks are very swift flyers, attaining incredible dive speeds before snatching their unsuspecting prey directly from the air. The larger greys are known to be stronger and more versatile creatures, capable of long-distance flight and aggressive enough to attack even roaming herd animals, such as wild boars, antelopes and deer.

The elder elves once tried to domesticate the cristeset, attempting to train the fierce creatures as messengers and defenders against the northern hordes. In the end, these training efforts yielded little success with the independent and strong-willed cristeset. So the elves eventually gave up. Not all were dissuaded, however. Legend has it that an impatient young mage named Tyrieon defied the elders by insisting that forbidden magic could be used to subjugate the cristeset. He labored in secret to bring his plans to fruition.

The grey cristeset were already semi-intelligent creatures, but Tyrieon's magic raised their consciousness and even gave them the ability to communicate telepathically. To young Tyrieon, the unfiltered thoughts of the aggressive cristeset was frightening, though, and he ultimately grew concerned that the creatures might turn against his people. Out of fear, the young elf decided that he should just destroy the enchanted cristeset and conceal the evidence of his wrongdoing. Before Tyrieon could act, though, the fierce greys overwhelmed him and escaped. As they vanished into the deep forest, the cristeset carried with them a deep resentment of the elves; a hatred that persists to this day.

In the current age, grey cristeset are rarely seen in Silvandom, except for the far northern reaches where they are said to make their homes among the high western cliff faces overlooking the forest. Some whisper that the cristeset bear allegiance to the Empress of Boeotia, providing her a close watch on the elvish lands. Others insist that the descendants of the enchanted greys prefer to keep to their own affairs and guard their secrets closely. Very few, if any, know for sure as the cristeset defend their territory well and do not tolerate outsiders.

The elves prefer to not speak of the cristeset, even though it is said that they periodically send emissaries to the greys to negotiate in secret. The elves may harbor a concern that the greys exhibit more than bitter anger towards them, but also an affinity for magic and a willingness to practice it. Those brave enough to venture close to the realm of the greys report flickers of blue flame in the upper cliffs and an unsettling feeling that someone or something invades their thoughts. Few journey farther than that point.

The Monster Solitude

By Raymond Ibrahim

Amongst the wastelands and uninhabitable places dwells a being—monster to some, empowering divinity to others—whose history is obscure. When spoken of, he is often addressed as a metaphysical or a wholly abstract phenomenon. But the Ancients knew better. For just as the people of old personified abstractions—Wisdom, Fate, Fear—the peoples of the desolate deserts, who are naturally most acquainted with this entity, gave him a name. Yet as time advanced, knowledge of him became corrupt, lost in legend and shrouded in mist, till in time the only known records of him were of a folkloric, vulgar nature.

He eventually came to be known as al-Jinn, or amongst other tongues, Eraymos.

Most of these tales that have come to us concerning this Jinn are but fanciful children's stories, having no basis in fact. He does not abide in a lamp, granting wishes to his releasers, nor does he possess a human countenance or display human interests for wealth, fame or pleasure. Indeed, the only valid characteristic attributable to this fellow coming to us from the tales of old is his ambivalence. For this much is true: some, after encountering him, have emerged out of the desert the better for it; most never emerge at all.

The most accurate name for this being then, in the vernacular, is Solitude. He abides in all the lonely corners of the world, waxing in strength in direct proportion to the sheer solitude of the land. As for his appearance, none can rightly tell. It has been rumored that often he can be seen delighting in the heart of a desert-storm; many who met peril at the edge of a pool of swallowing-sand proclaim that they saw him grinning there. But again, these appear to be vague and frantic descriptions, nothing more. The best people to tell of this monster, Solitude, are those who felt his absolute manifestation: both those who walked out of the desert renewed and empowered, and those who were utterly vanquished, swallowed by the sands. Yet the former will not tell (perhaps out of reverence), and the latter speak no more.

As the fire tries and proves metal while melting all weaker substances, so are the powers of Solitude. All who encounter him have their mettle tested, and the further they walk with him in the lonely haunts of the world, the greater they are tried: to the point of either completely breaking, or triumphantly emerging, with a renewed and profound strength.

This is Solitude's power, then. By taking away all from the sight and mind of those who encounter him, by presenting to them only the barren lands, he makes them—often for the first time—confront reality. And this alone suffices to drive men mad. Withholding all distractions, which mortal man often seeks, Solitude thrusts absolute Truth on the unwary wayfarer, often overwhelming him. As emptiness and silence engulf the sojourner, naught is left but what is, and many a one-time heroic champion has crumbled before this overwhelming profundity. Yet, as has been related before, other travelers after doing battle with this terror not only emerge whole but stronger for it. For the powers of Solitude are precisely this: the already wise and noble are further strengthened, while the already foolish and craven are further weakened, till they cease to be.

Perhaps this is why it is said that only those who experience Solitude's severest onslaught have truly seen and known his terrible countenance; for it seems likely that what they saw was nothing more or less than themselves: what they are, stripped of the flattering deceits of the world. And surely not many men can withstand such a sight.

The Elknave

By Matthew Dunn

Only Known Treatise on Elknaves
Attributed to Brother Palahn, Druid of the Second Order
circa third known Cycle of the Plague

My Esteemed Brothers,

In the course of my explorations east of the realm of our dwarven brethren, I have found much of interest and excitement. I shall not continue here my discourse on the infrequent settlers encountered in this oft-forgotten forest, as I have presently uncovered such a marvel as to astound and silence my tongue. During communion with a delightful elder Ash, I became aware of a presence, one I had never before felt or experienced. With obvious excitement, I disengaged my Bond with that noble Tree and attempted to initiate a Bond with this unseen newcomer. The nature of this first communication was foreign, at best. Typically, when initiating a Bond, that familiarity with which we address the other being provides a framework for communication, but with this beast there had been no previous contact! I believe it is the first of its kind to address man in eons. Imagine my exhilaration in being that man!

The closest I could group this new Bond was with the Equine beasts of the Havenrook Forests, such as the moose and elk, and more loosely with horses. This initial reaction proved astute, as I shall describe. The overwhelming feeling I registered upon contact was one of calm indifference, as is often the case with that group. After projecting my peaceable intentions and non-threatening demeanor, I managed to coax the animal into the clearing in which I had made camp. For some time before it emerged from the foliage, I heard its approach. The sound of approaching hooves was also accompanied by what I can best describe as metal buckles. While there was no saddle or bridle on the animal, each step announced a metallic *clack* preceding the hoof. Whether it is perhaps akin to cracking of a knuckle, I know not. The nature of our new Bond did not permit a detailed questioning.

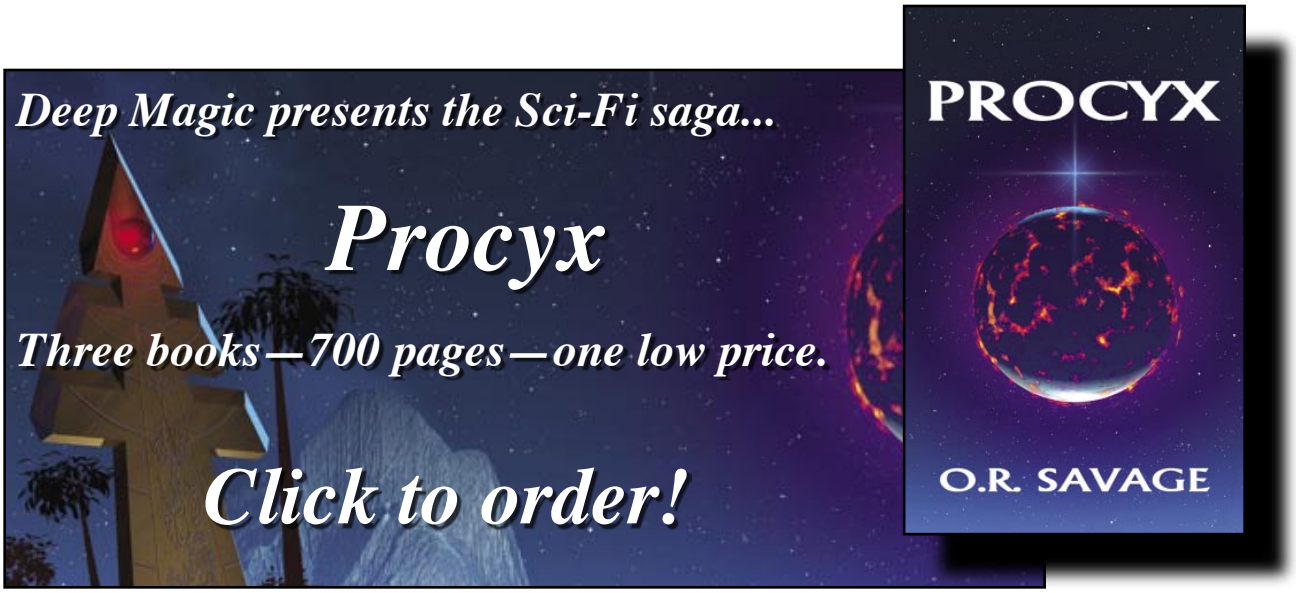
Once it emerged, this Elknave, as I have called it, greeted me with a snicker and quite a grin. The resemblance and obvious relation of the Elknave to the moose was unmistakable. The beast bared its teeth as a horse, revealing a mouth accustomed to a diet of grasses and berries. Combined with its jovial eyes and akimbo antlers, the resemblance to a court knave was unmistakable. Despite its endearing grin, towards the molars, two large canines protruded from the upper jaw, obviously intended for prey. Standing on its fours, the Elknave towered above my lanky frame.

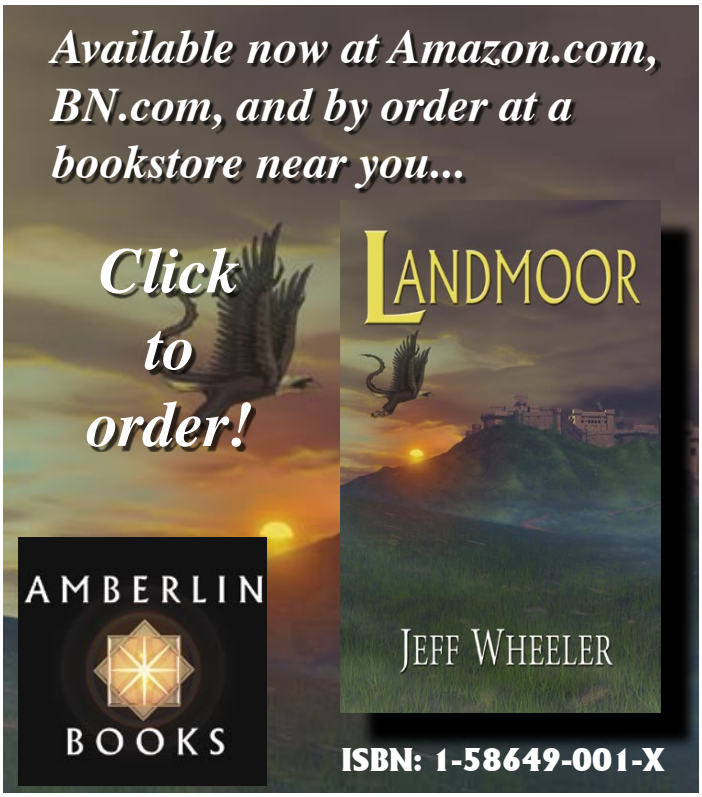
As I attempted to probe the Elknave of its thoughts, the lumbering beast rose on its hind legs, leaned its forepaws into the Ash, and began consuming leaves. Using its considerable antlers, it then shook the branches, dislocating several small birds. But, the prize! It awoke an unwary raccoon. The bandit attempted cowardly flight, but with a grace hidden by its cumbersome appearance, the Elknave nimbly snatched it from the branches. A large crack told

the end of the bandit's life, and the Elknave descended, prey ensnared.

Rather than disturb its well won meal, I retreated in the

Here ends the legible portion of Brother Palahn's journal. A section of the lower page had been torn off, and runny ink rendered the remainder of the text illegible. This treatise on the supposed Elknave, and the journal in which it resided, was found by dwarves unknown in an abandoned canoe aground of the Mhadair River east of the Alkire Mountains. Records of any subsequent contact with Brother Palahn are lost to time and Plague.





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The Archer and the Dove

By Bret Ludwig

Banks of war-born smoke chased Drenn from the battlefield, dimming the early-summer sun and making his eyes water. He dabbed at them periodically with the red-stained sleeve of his jerkin, never pausing in his measured run. He'd considered himself accustomed to filth and stench after working his farm for the last fourteen years and his father's before that. Field dirt and pigsties were a far cry from the blood of his friends and the charnel odor of the battlefield. The latter put him in mind of slaughtering day magnified a thousand-fold.

A gust of wind from the north nudged his back, hurrying him away from the disaster. The breeze carried the distant sounds of continued fighting: command trumpets, the ring of sword on shield and the battle-chant of his countrymen. The tempo of the chant changed. Drenn's pulse quickened. A moment later, he noticed his pace had as well. The companies fighting the rear-guard action had taken up the martyrs' chant. The slow, funereal dirge prepared doomed men for the passage from this life, assuring them that their sacrifice for kin and country was not in vain.

The command trumpets had sounded retreat too late for most of Drenn's company. Bands of Weltruni horsemen riding at will behind the Pleirkonian lines had separated him from the few other survivors.

The breeze carried the distant sounds of continued fighting: command trumpets, the ring of sword on shield and the battle-chant of his countrymen.

He concentrated on slowing the *swish, thump, swish, thump* of his run through the knee-high wheat to a pace that he could maintain for miles. He might have feared that his best efforts at fleeing would be insufficient, but today was not his day to die.

He topped one of the many low rises that dotted the rolling countryside. A mile ahead lay the remnants of the village of Vin's Mill. To his right, at the limit of his vision, two companies of pikemen retreated south in good order. At the base of the hill on which he now stood a man lay curled in a fetal position, his back to Drenn.

The man's dark brown hair came to his shoulders, a fashion not embraced by the local men of northern Pleirkon. He wore clothes similar to Drenn's, not the armor and livery of the army. A bow lay to one side. On the other side lay a small wooden shield, its face painted checkered blue and gold, Pleirkon's insignia. An old, worn short sword rested at the man's left hip. His equipment named the man part of King Volance's levies.

At least he made it away from the chaos and stench before passing, thought Drenn. Halfway down the rise he noted the quiver on the man's back held two arrows. He veered toward the form, needing to augment the few arrows remaining to him.

As Drenn closed, he noted the man was trembling. He stopped five paces behind the prone figure. After a heartbeat, the trembling stopped and the man shouted, "End it already, you bastards!" He had yet to turn to see who approached.

The voice carried the nasal tone of the south, confirming what Drenn had suspected from

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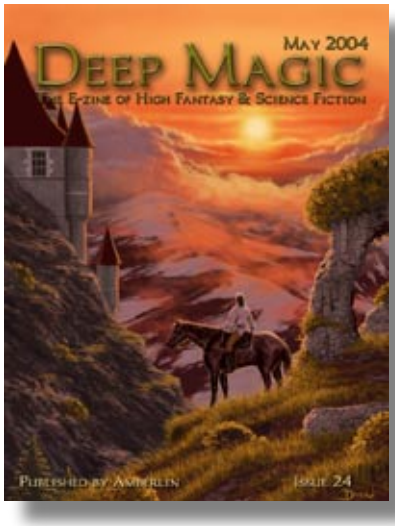
Featured Artist
Chris Dien



Age: 28
Residence: Portland, Oregon, USA
Marital Status: Single
Children: None
Hobbies: Golf, weight training, boxing
Favorite Book or Author: George R. R. Martin
Started Painting In: 2000
Artist Most Inspired By: Edmund Blair-Leighton
Media You Work In: Oils, Acrylics, Digital
Educational/Training Background: Self taught in art
Schools Attended: Portland State University
Where Your Work Has Been Published or Displayed: Various collectable card games, RPG covers and interiors
Where Someone Can Buy Your Art or Contact You Professionally: www.ChrisDien.com
Website URL: www.ChrisDien.com

Q: How did you come to be an artist?
A: I started doodling on the walls as a child.

Q: How would you describe your work?
A: Constantly evolving

Q: Where do you find your inspiration?
A: Books, movies, life...

Q: What inspired this piece?
A: It was done as a portfolio piece a while back. I just wanted to do an outdoor scene with dramatic lighting. It didn't turn out exactly like I wanted it to. But for some reason people seem to like it.

Q: What do you consider your influences?
A: I have too many influences to list. Basically, everything that I've ever run across has influenced me in some way.

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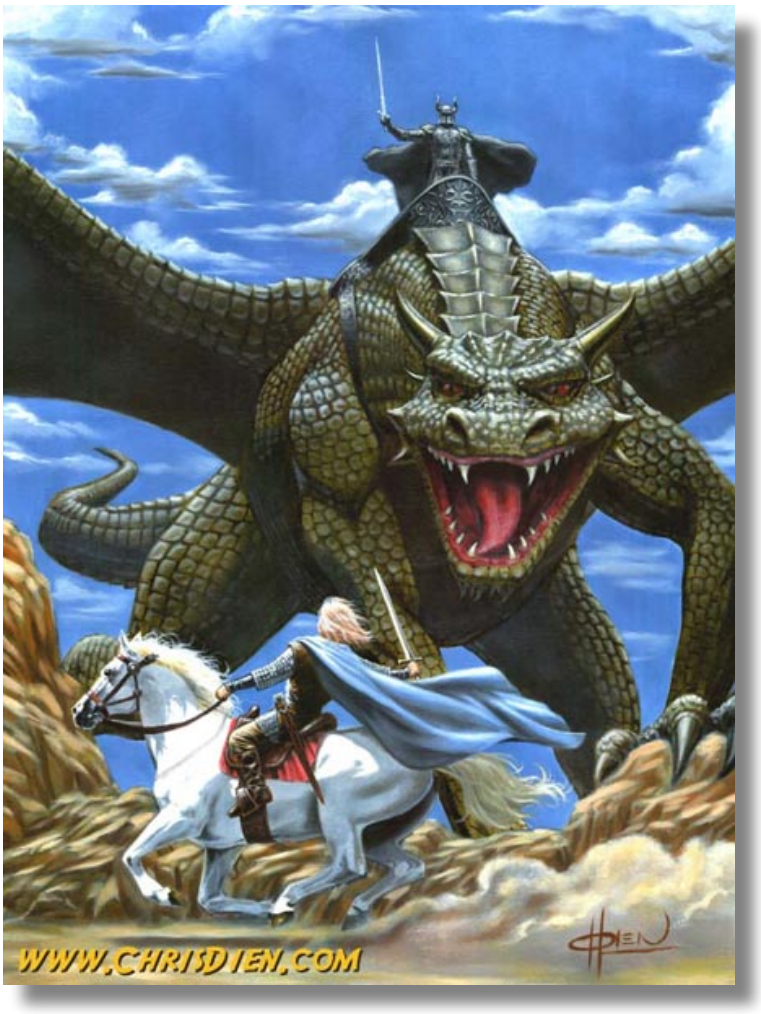

Q: What has been your greatest success in your artistic career?
A: So far it is being able to do it as a full time occupation.

Q: What trends are you seeing in the Sci-Fi/Fantasy genre?
A: Things are heading in a dark gritty theme a little too much. It might just be the times, but I'd like it to see more light hearted themes. Although many times it is out of the hands of the illustrators.

A Taste of Time

By Abby Goldsmith

June 1, 2004

On the night of her fortieth birthday, Jane sat alone in the TV corner drinking to her depression. Normally she would have worried about getting drunk on a weeknight, but she had nowhere to go in the morning. She had just been fired. As she watched the tube and contemplated dying alone, Jane heard the front door creak open.

She gripped the arms of her chair and leaned over, peering around the corner to the entrance.

A black wine bottle stood on the floor. It was wrapped with a silver ribbon, and a placard dangled from the bow.

Jane's gaze flicked up to the locked door latch. The deadbolt was in place, as she had left it.

She set aside her beer and walked toward the front door, jumping at every shadow. There were only a handful of living people who knew Jane or cared to know her. Several weeks ago, when her husband had walked out, she'd had the locks changed. Now she double-checked her security system and rattled the doorknob. It was firmly locked.

A part of Jane was aware that she should feel exhausted after such a long day. Instead, she felt invigorated, ready to run a marathon and spend a day kicking balls at the beach.

The bottle sat mysteriously on the wooden floor. Jane picked it up and read the placard.

Tabula Rasa

Warning: There Is No Return

The gilded letters inspired her to think of an era before electricity. She flipped the placard over twice, but nothing else was written.

Shrugging off a chill, she turned off her TV, alert for any noise beyond the sound of the city traffic outside. She settled back in her armchair. Mystery had never been a part of her life, and it gave her a strangely excited feeling. The idea of poison crossed her mind, but she had as few enemies as friends. Surely her absent husband would not waste money on an expensive bottle. Or open and close a locked door.

Her reflection in the black surface of the bottle was disturbingly clear. She saw a fat, frumpy woman who had lost all of her beauty sometime during the last ten years. Her life had been one failure after another. Perhaps she would be better off if the bottle did contain poison.

The lid was a screw cap. She unscrewed it and popped the foil underneath. A stringent smell wafted up, causing her to salivate and wrinkle her nose at the same time. But she didn't care about taste; she wanted high proof. Muttering "Happy Birthday" to herself, Jane tipped her head back and swallowed a mouthful.

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The Dreaded "O" Word

By Terry Brooks

Excerpted from SOMETIMES THE MAGIC WORKS by Terry Brooks. Copyright © 2003 by Terry Brooks. Reprinted by arrangement with Ballantine Books, A Division of Random House Inc.

Now we come to the two chapters that are certain to be the most controversial. I have pushed them as far back into the book as I can, hoping that if you have gotten this far in your reading, you will stick it out for another few pages. This chapter and the next are intended primarily for unpublished writers looking to become published, but I'm hoping readers in general will find them interesting, too.

Writing isn't a crapshoot. Publishing, yes—but not writing. Writing is a craft. You can learn it, and you can learn to do it better.

Sue Grafton would title this first chapter in her writing manual, if she had one, "O Is for Outline."

I have a very simple ten-word formula for success as a writer of long fiction. It might apply to all forms of writing, but my experience is primarily in writing long fiction, so I am limiting the application of the formula to that form alone. I give this formula to you, as I do to anyone I speak to about writing, free of charge. It goes like this:

Read, Read, Read.
Outline, Outline, Outline.
Write, Write, Write.
Repeat.

I don't get much argument about steps one and three, which are pretty much self-evident to anyone with real aspirations for becoming a published writer. Nor does anyone have too much to say about step four, which is difficult to avoid in this business unless the degree of luck you experience in attempting to interest a publisher in your work is legendary.

But whole bunches of people recoil with genuine horror when I mention step two. They remember with no fondness whatsoever their secondary school experiences. They remember what they had to go through in learning about outlining from one or more teachers of English. The hated words still echo somewhere in the deep recesses of their minds. *Large Roman Numeral One, Capital A, small Roman numeral one, little a*—a litany of senseless conformity and rote invented solely to drive students mad.

Well, forget all that. When I speak of outlining, I want you to think of something else entirely, something that shares only one thing in common with all that early secondary school nonsense. That one thing is another "O" word—organization.

Now, you are going to hear a lot of very successful writers tell you that they don't outline their books. Never have, never will. They are going to give you all sorts of reasons why you shouldn't either—sometimes in direct fashion, sometimes by implication. *I've never done it*,

they will advise, *so it's all right if you don't. Or, I've never seen the point to it, so how could you?* Like that. I've listened to and read comments like this for years—not from writers selling five thousand copies of their books a year, but five hundred thousand.

Let me give you some examples. Stephen King writes in his entertaining and informative book *On Writing* that plotting just gets in the way of storytelling and robs it of its spontaneity. He prefers just to plop down characters in a challenging situation and see what they will do. Anne Lamott in her wonderful book on what it is like to become a published writer, *Bird by Bird*, talks about just sitting down at the keyboard with no plan in mind whatsoever and thrashing around for hours, sometimes days, until something finally happens. I've listened to Terry McMillan, on being asked about outlining, reply to an audience of two thousand at the Maui Writers Conference, "Why would I want to tell the same story twice?" On a fantasy writing panel several years ago, after I had given my usual spiel about the importance of outlining, I had Anne McCaffrey turn to me and gently and sweetly say, "Terry, I don't think I've ever outlined anything in my life."

The list of successful writers who claim not to outline their books before they write them goes on and on. All right, you say, so why are you telling us we should outline when they don't? Why can't we do like they do? Why can't we just sit down and tell our stories?

Well, maybe you can. Maybe you're one of the lucky ones who can make it work. On the other hand, maybe not. We know right off the bat that you probably aren't Stephen King or Anne Lamott or Terry McMillan or Anne McCaffrey. We also know that a lot of other writers aren't either, and a fair number, some of them very successful, do outline their work before they sit down to write their books.

Ask yourself this: How many books have you read where the author introduced a plot element that seemed to never go anywhere? Or involved you with a character who wandered off somewhere along the way and never returned? How many books have you read where the first three hundred pages were wonderful, and then everything fell apart—where you had the feeling that the author was just looking to wrap things up and get paid? How many books have you read that were so disjointed in their storytelling that you had to keep looking back to see where they were going? How many books have you read that were so empty of purpose that by the time you finished reading them—supposing you got that far—you felt you had been cheated out of the twenty-five-dollar purchase price?

I would suggest that all of these problems are organizational in nature, which means it is more likely than not that the author failed to do a lick of outlining.

Writing isn't a crapshoot. Publishing, yes—but not writing. Writing is a craft. You can learn it, and you can learn to do it better. As you've already read previously in this book, you might have it in you to be a writer or you might not; that's just the way it is. But if you do have it in you, what you would like to do is to reduce the odds of producing a piece of writing that doesn't represent your best effort.

So let me give you my thoughts on why I think outlining is a valuable tool that doesn't have to deflate your excitement before you even get started or turn your writing experience into a boring exercise in word assembly.

If you outline your book in advance, you will force yourself to think your story through. To some degree, depending on how thorough you choose to be, you will have to juggle plot, characters, settings, points of view, and thematic structure in order to assemble your story. You will have to build a story arc—a beginning, middle, and end—that comprises the gist of your book. You will have to consider all the possible choices you can imagine in crucial situations and

select the ones that seem best. You won't do this for every twist and turn the book takes, but you will do it for the big ones. You will take this information and you will write it down in some recognizable fashion so that you can refer to it later.

This accomplishes several important goals.

It gives you a working blueprint to which you can refer later. Now, I don't know about you, but it takes me a while to write a book. It doesn't take just days or weeks, but months and sometimes years. For me, that's a long time to remember stuff. After fifty-odd years of dealing with life's vicissitudes, I find I don't remember things as well as I used to—or maybe as well as I think I used to. Having written down what it was you intended to do and where it was you intended to go can be a big help. Five months after you've started a book, you can still look at that blueprint and know what it was you wanted to accomplish when you started out—not only with the story at large, but with every major plot point and character.

By having outlined, you are also in a better position to know during the course of your writing when you are being scammed by trickster plot twists and duplicitous characters—by all those ideas that seem so good at the time, but in the end will lead you astray. It is a given that in the writing of any book, your outline will change. I mean, come on, you didn't think I was going to tell you your outline was written in stone, did you? These are working drawings we're talking about. These are sketches. Nothing informs the writer about how a book should come together like the actual writing of it. Remember what I said earlier about discarding all those preconceived notions about outlines? Here's a good place to start. No matter how thoroughly or carefully you have considered your story, you are going to get new and better ideas about how it should be told when you actually write it. You are going to see places where you can improve on the original plot, tighten the narrative, better use a character, and so on and so forth.

But by having already considered most of the possibilities while you were constructing your outline, you can now make a more informed decision about which way to go. Because you have those working drawings at hand, you can tell how a change you are contemplating will impact the rest of your book. The end result is that you can do a better job of keeping at bay those plot lines and characters that will play you false.

I would also argue that there is a good chance that an outline will help you stave off any onslaught of writer's block. Let me advise you right up front that I am not a big believer in writer's block. I think writer's block is God's way of telling you one of two things—that you failed to think your material through sufficiently before you started writing, or that you need a day or two off with your family and friends. In the latter instance, God frequently speaks to me through Judine. In the former, listen to this voice of reason as it whispers in your ear. *Hssst! If you want to avoid writing yourself into the box of dead ends or out into the desert of poor ideas or off into the wilderness of ill-considered plot choices, an outline will help!*

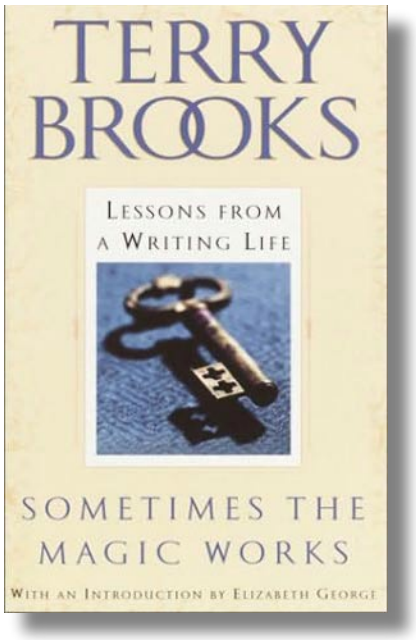
Perhaps the best reason of all for outlining is that it frees you up immeasurably during the writing process to concentrate on matters other than plot. Think about it. Each chapter needs to be told from a character's point of view, needs to establish a mood and set a scene, likely requires both narrative and dialogue, and probably demands a sense of movement. That's just the bare bones of it, but even that much is fairly daunting. Plus, you have to think about how your story will come across to the reader. What words and images will you use? What emotions will you try to evoke? Where is the conflict in this scene? Is there a turning point, a secret, a revelation, a red herring?

Now, on top of that you want to mess around with trying to figure out your plot? Who do you think you are—Houdini?

Okay, I exaggerate. I'm a writer, what do you expect? But the core truth remains unaltered. If you take time in the beginning to think your story through and commit some of those thoughts to paper in the form of an outline, you will free yourself up later to concentrate on other matters of writing and thereby reduce some of the stress in your life.

In the next chapter, we'll take a look at specific ways in which you can make this process work...

Read *Sometimes the Magic Works* by Terry Brooks for more...



The Interstellar Public Health Inspector

By Nigel Atkinson

I was only tweaking the Commonwealth's nose. I'll admit to being a bit of a nuisance, but 'the worst criminal in human history'? That's so harsh. Especially since they let the Domble-Domble colony go with a ticking-off!

What I really need at the moment are some lawyer memories, but the Commonwealth always kills the lawyers. Sounds sweet right now.

* * *

'Help push back the frontiers of science. Bring peace and harmony to a thousand civilizations. Travel to faraway exotic planets! Make friends with unusual and exciting life-forms.'

I fell for it. The friendly lady from the Commonwealth (Human) Education Bureau was so happy to meet me. She didn't mind that I had wandered into her booth accidentally, while looking for the gents. Oddly, she wasn't too interested in hearing about my degree in post-industrial cliché and symbolism in early twenty-first century urban mural art (a course so trendy no capital letters were used in its presentation).

What I really need at the moment are some lawyer memories, but the Commonwealth always kills the lawyers. Sounds sweet right now.

She listened politely as I told her all about it. How I took the accelerated modular sandwich learning model. Although I got a lot of credit for prior learning (I knew how to handle a spray can), it was the toughest three months of my life. After graduating, I did the usual things—spending the next two years wandering aimlessly while sponging off friends, relatives, and the state.

Then I turned twenty-three, and I was able to benefit from the Commonwealth's Universal Adult Employment Guarantee. Put another way: find a job or starve.The recruitment lady smiled and made a lot of eye contact.

"You have untapped potential," she said. "The Commonwealth is always on the look out for young humans with a sense of adventure. Do you have a sense of adventure?"

"Suppose so."

"Do you want to see the galaxy?"

"As a star pilot?" I asked excitedly.

"No, you are a little old for that. The Commonwealth prefers to select human children for that rare distinction."

'Select', was the word she used, but her eyes said 'abduct'. I decided not to lift the rock to peer at that particular urban legend.

"Would you be interested in a full scholarship to study with Gamboolaboola University?"

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Page Turners
Deep Magic Looks at Books

Be sure to check out the Book Reviews website, which contains all current and past book reviews in an easily searchable format. It also allows you to leave your own review or feedback for a book. All you have to do it register on our message boards and you can tell others what you think of the books. We hope you enjoy it, and we'll see you there!

Deep Magic Book Reviews website

Editor's Choice: Classic Sci-Fi

The Foundation Trilogy: Foundation, Foundation and Empire, and Second Foundation

By Isaac Asimov

The story begins with Dr. Hari Seldon. Dr. Seldon has developed a mathematical means for predicting the future. This new field he calls psychohistory.

According to Dr. Seldon's calculations, the Galactic Empire (which has stood for 12,000 years) is in a state of decline and will fall completely within 500 years. This fall will have the devastating effect of thrusting humanity into a barbaric dark age. The time between the fall of the current Galactic Empire and the rise of a new civilization is predicted to be 30,000 years.

Nothing can stop the fall of the Empire. Seldon believes he can minimize the effects of this fall on humanity. His plan hopes to shorten the time between when the empire falls and the Second Empire rises from 30,000 years to 1,000 years.

To achieve this end, Seldon and fellow psychohistorians arrange for a Foundation to be set up on Terminus, a planet at the far edge of the galaxy. Nominally set up for the purpose of compiling a Galactic Encyclopedia, this Foundation is actually the beginning of the next empire… if events unfold as Seldon has predicted.

Asimov was one of the great pioneers in Science Fiction, and a masterful storyteller. The universe created in the Foundation series is rich in detail and depth. These books were first published more than 50 years ago. They are skillfully written, a true pleasure to read, and amazingly, not dated.

All elements of the story in this series are well done, but the plot, and Asimov's strict adherence to it is the strength of this series. He does a fabulous job giving enough information to give the story great depth, but doesn't spend time covering nonessential side stories. If the story requires, he will jump ahead in time to the next major event in his plot line.

Asimov uses memorable characters to dramatize events. When one character's portion of the story has ended, Asimov introduces new characters, equally well written, to continue the thread of the story.

These books are brilliantly crafted classics of science fiction, definitely a must-read for any fan of the genre.

The Foundation series by Isaac Asimov also includes: *Prelude to Foundation, Foundation's Edge*, and *Forward the Foundation*.

Possible objectionable material: none.

(Reviewed by Rochelle Taylor)

Book Review: Fantasy

The Girl, the Dragon and the Wild Magic

By Dave Luckett

Rhianna Wildwood is failing magic school. She tries hard and does exactly what the teacher says, but

continued on next page

that's the problem. Rhianna is too exact. Magic is more of an art, something to be felt rather than measured. There are no clear, exact rules for working magic.

Rhianna isn't the only one in her town with problems. Magic isn't working well for anyone lately. All over town, magic wards and spells are failing. To determine the cause for the town's magic problems, the local spellwright requests a wizard from the Queen's court to investigate.

Upon arriving, the wizard immediately recognizes the problem. Rhianna is a wild talent. She drains the local magic by simply existing.

This also explains Rhianna's problems at school. Normal magic casting won't work for her. Rhianna must learn to use magic her own way.

The wizard takes Rhianna as his apprentice and assigns her special lessons to do at school. Life seems to have settled into a routine for Rhianna and her family, but their troubles are far from over.

Rhianna is a girl that children can relate to. She gets bored during school, she has friends and she has enemies. All characters were simple, but well-drawn. The antagonists were particularly well described, clearly bad, but not horrible—perfect for a children's book.

This is a fun children's story. It has a simple, but not completely predictable plot. I look forward to reading the sequel(s).

Possible objectionable material: None

(Reviewed by Rochelle Taylor)

Book Review: Fantasy

Usagi Yojimbo

By Stan Sakai

In 17th-century Japan, the Shogun rules the land and his peace has brought the feudal wars to an end. Now, many lords no longer need to maintain large armies of samurai, and so ronin (masterless samurai) now wander the country, hiring themselves out as mercenaries, turning to banditry, and occasionally falling into poverty. Behind the Shogun's back, some lords plot to overthrow him, and crime bosses dominate many towns.

This provides the setting for Stan Sakai's fantasy comic book, Usagi Yojimbo, which takes place in an alternate-reality Japan populated by animals with occasional supernatural elements in the form of obakemono, malignant demons that haunt the land. The comic follows the adventures of Usagi Miyamoto, a ronin ever since his lord was slain in battle during the feudal wars against his greatest enemy, the shadow lord Hikiji. Usagi encounters many dangers during his travels—demons, bandits, ninja, other samurai, and the ever-scheming lord Hikiji. He encounters Gen, the self-serving rhinoceros bounty hunter, Sanshobo, the samurai turned priest, Yagi the Lone Goat Assassin, Sasuke the demon-queller, his old sensei (teacher) Katsuichi, and Tomoe, loyal bodyguard to Lord Noriyuki, a Shogun loyalist who is constantly in danger from Lord Hikiji's ninja. After Hikiji and the Neko ninja, Usagi's greatest enemy is Jei, the insane wolf who believes himself to be the Blade of the Gods, destined to destroy all evil in the world—and to him, Usagi is the greatest evil that he must exterminate.

The comics don't possess any overarching story line, but Usagi does evolve over the course of the series, as do all the major characters: Usagi becomes more complex, Jei becomes creepier, his sensei Katsuichi's past is revealed, Gen undergoes his own gradual transformation, etc. There are a few major plot arcs alongside the independent stories, including the Grasscutter saga which concerns the intrigues surrounding a sword forged by the gods themselves.

The art is simple, and a few of the minor characters are a little difficult to tell apart, but it is well rendered and conveys the story and action superbly. The plots are usually fairly simple, and in recent issues even a little repetitive, but usually have enough of a twist to keep them interesting. The author has an immense knowledge of Japanese history and culture which he uses to good effect—I can honestly say that a great part of my knowledge of Japan comes from this comic. Overall, Usagi Yojimbo is a great achievement, and highly recommended.

Possible objectionable material: Much swordplay with some blood, graphic, with rare stronger violence;

continued on next page

occasional suggestive content, mildly frightening demons, some Shinto and Buddhist spirituality

(Reviewed by Sean T. M. Stiennon)

Book Review: Fantasy
William Hope Hodgson's Night Lands: Volume 1, Eternal Love
By Andy W. Robertson, Editor

This anthology is set in William Hope Hodgson's entropic Night Lands universe. The original work by Hodgson was based on the scientific knowledge of his day (100 years before ours). His besieged hero stands with one foot in the 18th century and the other millions of years in the future. The speculation of the stories set within such limits, involving the love that the human race has for itself, makes them a worthwhile read. Eleven stories of varying lengths, and two poems, have been gathered in Hodgson's honor. In millions of years, one may take comfort in the thought that gallant knights will still sally forth against all odds to save (or merely gain favor with) fair ladies, as they have always done. The poignant message is not lessened even though the sun is dead, the earth dying, and no hint of the divine spark is revealed other than man's will to survive. Editor Robinson, with coeditor Nigel Brown, intends to honor the vision of a countryman whose life ended too soon in the trenches of World War I. The influence of Hodgson's better-known contemporaries, H.G. Wells and H.P. Lovecraft, so evident in the original Night Lands, continues in these new writings, but only to their betterment.

"Dream," "Out," and "Eater," Robertson's three brief tales, are set in the society of the Great Redoubt, mankind's last stronghold. Like most of the other pieces included, his depict gifted young lovers conflicted within the harsh constraints of their closed society. I suggest that the reader begin with James Stoddard's "The Testament of Andros," followed by John C. Wright's "Awake in the Night," in order to understand where Hodgson's Redoubt society is coming from. Then, to capture the feel, go back and read the poems by Lucy Ward and Erin Donahoe before any of the stories.

To me the weakest work is Sean McLachlan's "The Siege of Humanity," which comes across primarily as a retelling of humanity's major mistakes; nevertheless, it has a certain poetic appeal and effectively points out history's pivotal moments. Feminists will love the ironic ending of Brett Davidson's "Imago;" aviation buffs will find all but the ending worthwhile. In "Catharsis" by Nigel Brown, unseen possibilities encroach upon the light. Admirers of early astronomy, as well as of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, will enjoy Nigel Atkinson's "A Mouse in the Walls of the Lesser Redoubt." His science fiction has a magical feel, while his "...Exhalation of Butterflies" is pure magic. Brett Davidson introduces yet another unforgettable frustrated heroine in "Meanwhile She Dreams," letting us follow a humble clerk's unique insight into our racial subconscious.

Possible objectionable material: Most of the romance is handled delicately, and there is no foul language. In fact, the language is quite elegant, although marred by frequent typos. A few intimate moments, such as childbirth, and, of course, bloody battles with monsters, are presented in a more adult manner.

(Reviewed by A.M. Stickel)

Wizards
By Steven Richards

The Wayland Messenger, Vol. 271
"*Hug a Wizard: Wayland's Mages and You*" by Lycelle Timas

Wizards. Boon and bane to civilization, they are nearly as hard to define as their source of power (though they prefer the less provocative term 'energy' in place of 'power'). To some, they are a threat to all that is good and proper in the world. They are quiet, aloof, secretive. They are wielders of raw, mysterious energies, energies which are immensely powerful and—to the best of anyone's knowledge—boundless. They rarely marry. They do much of their work at night. And, much like accountants in this regard, they have an unhealthy attraction to numbers. Like accountants, this affords them a modicum of respect; the common man or woman is aware, at some level, that this fellow could probably make your life a living hell.

Wizards in some areas have won acceptance beyond the respect due their power. Their wards protect homes, businesses and townships from the ever-present threat of fellow human beings. Their skills in healing are well-renowned, though lacking the depth of understanding possessed by the Druids. In the cities, they have proved formidable allies to the militias in times of unrest, complementing more traditional methods of crowd-control with their talent for diplomacy and—if the situation demands it—the ability to repel flying objects such as bricks, firebombs and knives with no more than a moment's concentration. It is apparent to all that they desire stability. Rumors tell, however, of motives that are anything but altruistic. Of shadow organizations within the loosely-knit 'order' of wizards. Of dark experiments in dark hours.

That both sides of this debate are—at least in some form—correct seems increasingly likely. However, what some fail to realize is that wizards are as human as you or I, prone to all the same pitfalls (and a few more, no doubt) and victim of the same emotions, fuzzy reasoning and other mental afflictions. To assume that wizards hold a monopoly on shady dealings would be absurd. Assuming that us 'normal folks' are the only honest, hard-working citizens around would be equally absurd. Fortunately, these inaccurate perceptions are beginning to change.

When last we visited the world of wizardry (Ed: Vol. 199, '*Wizard, Barkeep, Father: The Friendly Face of Wayland's Mages*'), we found a considerably diverse (mostly men, admittedly, and mostly humans, though by no means restricted to those categories) group of people whose personalities, occupations and aspirations were as broadly varied as you could hope to find in any marketplace, pub or Square. Our article prominently featured a man many Wayland citizens

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The Geek's Guide to Grammar

Punctuating with Parentheses Part II

(continued from the April 2004 issue - Page 31)

DEFINITION: 1. A parenthesis is a word, phrase, or sentence providing a side thought or explanation that can be removed from a sentence with no adverse affect. 2. One of two curved symbols used to set apart a parenthesis. The plural for both definitions is parentheses.

Last month we looked at punctuating with parentheses when they fall at the end of a sentence. Now we'll look at mid-sentence parentheses. Let's start with an easy one:

```
The knight walked into the town (with his sword at his side, of course)
and straight to the first tavern he could find.
```

Fairly basic. No punctuation is needed before or after the parenthesis. If the sentence doesn't need punctuation before putting in the parenthesis, then the statement drops in without need any before or after, as above. Easy enough. But how about when the parenthesis falls at the end of an introductory clause?

```
With his sword raised high with both hands (he had dropped his shield
to the ground), the knight screamed his battle cry and charged off.
```

The above is punctuated properly. Often, however, the tendency is to do one of the following:

```
With his sword raised high with both hands, (he had dropped his shield
to the ground) the knight screamed his battle cry and charged off.

With his sword raised high with both hands (he had dropped his shield
to the ground,) the knight screamed his battle cry and charged off.
```

Both of the above are incorrect. The best suggestion I have is to remove the parenthesis, punctuate the sentence, then place it back in. And it nearly always goes in front of the comma, in the case of introductory clauses like the one above. An example of an exception would be when the parenthesis is part of, say, a phone number area code, (208) 555.1212. But in prose, the exceptions will rarely, if ever, come up.

Ask the Geek

Do you have a grammar question for The Geek? This is the place to ask. Simply send an email, and he'll respond. Be prepared, because your question may be printed in a future issue.
EMAIL THE GEEK

What about putting a parenthesis in the middle of a sentence when that statement is a complete sentence itself? In that case, treat it no differently than if it wasn't a complete sentence (i.e. no capitalization or end punctuation).

```
The knight walked into the town (this was the town he saw
in his dreams) and right to the first tavern he saw.
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So that should cover it. If you have any questions, or if I left anything unclear, drop me a line on our message boards.

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Royalty of Wind, Fire, and Clay

By Keri Stevenson

Part One of the Orlathian Trilogy

Chapter Thirty-Eight
Home

"The Dark is capable of calling the strangest places home."
—From the unpublished treatise A Study of the Dark.

"Here we are."

Pheron looked up, blinking a little and automatically clutching at the mane as the horse came to a stop. He had fallen into a daze during the last hour's ride. They hadn't stopped when night fell, although the steadily waning moon made it dangerous for the horses to run. Apparently, they were close to Jienna's home, and she wanted to push on. Pheron thought it was almost as if she were afraid that someone would catch her before they arrived there.

And now, apparently, they had arrived.

Jienna jumped from the horse—Pheron could just see that in the moonlight—and walked towards a black wall in front of them. She again held up a hand, just as she had to summon the horses, and hissed between her teeth. The wall shuddered, and then something opened within it. Pheron blinked as a flood of what looked like normal lamplight spilled from the stone.

Pheron didn't recognize the word, but he saw Seros's eyes widen in respect—or possibly fear.

"Come with me," she said over her shoulder and disappeared into the gold.

"What about the *sileni*?" Seros shouted after her.

"And the horses?" added Pheron.

"Leave them here," said Jienna over her shoulder. "My servants will look after them."

Pheron twisted in his seat to look back at Seros. "Can we trust her?" he asked, trying to keep his voice low so that Jienna wouldn't hear him, though he was sure that she knew what he was saying anyway.

"I don't know. I certainly don't trust her in general, but I've never been here before, and I suppose it's possible that we might be able to trust her servants." Seros slid from his own horse. "And it's never a good idea to disobey her."

Pheron nodded and slid off his horse. That he knew already; his aching ribs were a constant reminder.

He walked through the door and stopped, blinking. The room beyond could have been a

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the man's hair. Yet there was more. *I know that voice.*

Drenn said, "Candied apples and cinnamon."

The man sat up and spun about in a single movement, leaving his sword wedged uncomfortably between his hip and the ground. He appeared to be within a winter of Drenn's age, sporting a short beard two shades lighter than the hair on his head. His clothes, like Drenn's, bore spots and smears of blood, though none appeared to be his. He was lean as a whip, right down to the narrow nose between his dark blue eyes. Those eyes became wary slits. "What babble do you speak, stranger?"

"I'm no stranger, Quentin Shloe. And I don't babble. For the last four years you have salved the wounds of defeat after the Jellop county archery tournament with candied apples doused with cinnamon." The small smile that crept onto his face felt misplaced in a day of such horrors. "Ever the men of Bridgeton are a bit off the mark, always naming the sun's glare as the culprit, even on cloudy days."

Quentin's eyes lost their wariness. The lithe man levered himself to standing, putting Drenn in mind of a folding ruler stretching to its full length. Quentin cocked his head. The new squint of his eyes matched the purse of his lips as he appraised Drenn. "So a man of Whertien might claim. I may even agree he had the right to spout such ridiculous drivel if he'd ever placed better than second, Drenn Tillasen."

Drenn closed the distance to Quentin and extended his hand. The Bridgeton archer possessed a firm grip. Neither flinched from the dried blood on the other's palm. Both glanced to the northern rise. Beyond it, the battle-chant of their countrymen had faded to near silence. Drenn said, "The number of Pleirkonian voices dwindles. It's time we moved on."

"To where, Drenn? Their cavalry is already south of us. They didn't stop after riding roughshod through our ranks." Quentin's voice, as flat as a frozen lake and nearly as cold, spoke eloquently of defeat.

Unsure how to return a sense of purpose to Quentin, Drenn turned for inspiration to what kept him going. He'd joined the Jellop county muster fully expecting never to see his wife and daughter again. Beth would understand when his neighbor delivered the letter he'd written. He still pressed on – not all prophecies proved true. "Quentin, I'm sorry, I don't recall, do you have family back home?"

"Yes, my boys, Borle and Andrew, are home with Kyra."

"What direction is home, Quentin?" Drenn asked, gesturing south. "I've ten miles on top of your two hundred ahead of me before I come to my door, assuming King Volance's army doesn't take us back into its service between here and there. The first mile of that journey is to Vin's Mill. I'll decide the path for the next mile when I'm there."

Quentin sighed, nodded, turned to the south, and began walking. Drenn followed a half step behind. His chest constricted when Quentin's long strides carried him beyond his bow. Before Drenn could decide whether he would risk his own life by traveling with a man who gave no thought to defending himself, Quentin spun on his heel and retrieved the weapon. The vice around Drenn's heart loosened.

As they resumed a slow run, Drenn asked, "Did other men of your company escape the battle?"

"Three, though they are more boys than men, none with a score of summers behind him. We came away together, but halfway to Vin's Mill they hared off toward it, not waiting for an old

man of thirty-five summers and his tired legs."

Drenn's pace faltered for a step at Quentin's use of the word *hared*. *No. I have seen no dove scratch a rabbit. Today is* not *my day to die.*

They resumed running in silence, conserving their breath. Just before they topped a rise a half-mile outside the village, a resounding shout sounded to the north. The chant of the rear-guard had fallen silent. The invaders' cry of celebration was at first an immense white noise. As Drenn's weary legs pulled him to the top of the rise, the noise took on a double-beat rhythm. He knew the barbarians' chant before his ears could make it out. He'd heard it from their fifty thousand throats before the first blood had been shed that morning.

They topped the rise. The horror on the descending slope brought them to a stunned, ragged halt. The remains of three young Pleirkonian men lay strewn about the side of the hill amidst trampled grass and swaths of blood and gore. *How could I have thought Quentin was dead? His quiet, curled posture when I first saw him showed none of the agony these lads experienced when death found them.*

One body sprawled a few paces to the right of his path, sporting two of the short-shafted arrows used by the Weltruni horse archers. The second lay a dozen paces to the left. The gaping rent in the baby-faced man's chest suggested he'd stood his ground until killed. The third lay sprawled on his face two score strides beyond his brave friend. The jagged end of a shattered lance projected from his back.

Quentin tapped Drenn's shoulder and gestured off to the right. A Weltruni horseman lay atop the nearest rise. An arrow stood out from his upturned face. *At least the youngsters exacted a price from the Weltruni.* Drenn's eyes swept back to his dead countrymen. It took him a moment to identify the jagged-ended short staff lying near each; the invaders had taken time to ruin the men's bows. The nearer bodies lay on their backs, hiding their quivers. Drenn would have to roll them over to recover any unspent arrows. He looked to the young man who'd run. His quiver gaped empty next to the shattered lance.

Movement further to the east drew Drenn's eye. Four Weltruni reined their horses to a stop on a rise a quarter mile distant. One held the reins of a riderless mount. The blond northmen wore a ragged assortment of iron and hide armor. Their ponies' tack, more suited to herding the great deer herds of the north than war, included no barding.

"Volance's blessing on you, brother," Drenn said. The invocation of the king's name and His magic came automatically to Drenn's lips as he unlimbered Heartsong, his family's heirloom bow, from his back.

"Bugger all kings and their magic. I'm attached to this old hide of mine, and I'm tired of these Weltruni bastards trying to separate me from it!"

Drenn silently cheered his companion's fresh defiance. Quentin hurried to the nearest body, five yards off, and turned it over. The empty quiver seemed to mock his desperation. He said something pungent too softly for Drenn to make out. He looked from the other corpse to the enemy. "Oh, hells! Here they come!" He pulled his two arrows from his quiver, stabbed one into the ground and nocked the other.

Two of Drenn's arrows already resided point-down in the wheat before him. He notched the third and fought down his irrational desire to check his quiver again for arrows he knew weren't there.

The northmen had conversed for only a moment before kicking their horses into a charge.

They left the riderless mount behind and shouted a cry of challenge in their guttural language as they gained speed. Two of them pulled horn bows from sheaths on their saddles. The other two took the lead. White pennants, one splashed with red, fluttered from their lances.

Three hundred paces – Drenn estimated the range with a practiced eye. With an unlimited supply of arrows, he would have started loosing shafts at them. As it was, he had several seconds to contemplate the coming action. He chose his first target. "If you drop the lancers, I'll never again belittle the marksmanship of a Bridgetowner."

"Aye! A fairer bargain has not come my way all day, for you will not be around to belittle my aim if I miss. The archers are yours."

The sound of pounding hooves grew louder. The rushing forms grew larger. Neither Drenn nor Quentin drew his bow. *Two hundred paces.* Drenn had been twelve when he first cast an arrow that far. He waited, fingers dancing on the string, impatient to draw the longbow. He would now need only a large portion of luck to guide his arrow to a killing hit.

Luck – I nearly forgot! Drenn's right hand left his bowstring. His fingers, long practiced at plucking unseen arrows from the quiver on his back, had no trouble finding the new silver chain around his neck. He brought the silver pendant on it to his lips.

A chill passed through him and his vision suddenly seemed sharper. The horse archers had loosed their first arrows. With a marksman's eye, he watched the first quarter of their flight and then dismissed them; they would fall wide of him and Quentin.

As the enemy closed to one hundred paces, Drenn raised Heartsong and drew the arrow fletching to his right ear in a single, fluid movement. Heartsong creaked as he drew back. Drenn often imagined the wood purring contentedly at being put to use. It always lifted his spirits. The bowstring biting his calloused fingertips and the tension in his shoulders was as familiar and inviting as his wife's touch.

The horse archers launched another volley of death. He had no time to track the missiles. The horse of the larger archer made a much finer target than its rider at eighty paces. Drenn took a deep breath. The horse archer, busy drawing and loosing, let his chestnut horse run straight. Drenn shifted his aim a hair's-breadth to the left, compensating for the north wind.

He exhaled half and let the bowstring slide out of his fingers. The missile leapt away, the *shush* of its flight punctuated by the momentary *twang* of the bowstring. He didn't watch its passage, knowing that the bolt would find its mark. He bent to retrieve another arrow. Just as his fingers closed on the notched wood behind the fletching, a bolt *hissed* through the space his head had occupied a moment before.

A chill raced up his spine and he thought, *You don't know it's not my day to die, you poor bastards. You should have stayed home!* He nocked the arrow, stood straight and drew Heartsong to full. The thunder of hooves and the pained screaming of a horse kept the song of the wood from reaching his ears, but the music of the bow reached his spirit through the knotted tension in his arms and shoulders. Only two horses now bore down on him and Quentin, running a race on which men's lives had been wagered.

He sighted over the slender steel head topping the ash shaft of his arrow. A pea-sized lump of damp earth clung near the point – not enough to affect its flight. The second Weltruni archer became a better target with each of his horse's strides. They passed the sixty-pace mark. Drenn continued breathing slow and even, letting them close, making the shot more certain. The horse archer timed the loosing of his own arrow to coincide with the moment all of his mount's

hooves were airborne. In that instant of flight, free from concern of being jostled, the archer loosed at Quentin.

From the corner of his eye Drenn saw Quentin remain still, sighting on the lancer, trusting the arrow would fly wide. It proved a near thing; the arrow sliced the air between Drenn and Quentin, but far, far closer to the man from Bridgeton. Drenn silently applauded his countryman's bravery. Then an odd thought came to mind as his target closed to forty paces: *Perhaps he also visited Madam Yllen and knows today isn't his day to die either.*

He drew his habitual deep breath and targeted the Weltruni archer. He exhaled half, welcoming the familiar calm that stilled the trembling in his straining shoulders, and loosed.

A black streak leapt from his right, cutting behind the flight of his arrow as it sped toward the lancer. Drenn's bolt flew true, taking the archer in the chest and rolling him backward off the rump of his horse.

Quentin's arrow grazed the lancer's cheek. The blond man flinched at death's grasping hand coming so close. The lance head sagged momentarily and then came back up, aimed at Drenn's chest. A shiver coursed through Drenn, starting at the nape of his neck, where he swore he felt icy fingers grasping and sliding away.

Twenty paces. His fingers sought and found his last arrow without the aid of his eyes. Those never left the bright lance head with its twirling white pennant. Quentin's short sword hissed from his scabbard. The horse's hooves sounded like oddly regular thunder.

Fifteen paces. The Weltruni began a cry of victory. Drenn automatically guided the notch of the arrow to Heartsong's string. Quentin shouted something that didn't register. Drenn's world contracted to the Weltruni, the lance, the horse, and the familiar weight of Heartsong in his hands.

Ten paces. No archer's stance here. He could draw and loose standing still and straight, but at the cost of his life. He turned Heartsong parallel to the ground, and threw himself to the left. The lance swung away from the horse, seeking his heart.

Five paces. With Heartsong at half-draw and held before him at chest level, he waited for the feeling, the knowing, to come.

The lancer, either too skilled or too lucky, shifted the lance to bear on Drenn.

In the instant before he impacted the ground, he knew the shot would be true and loosed. A mighty tug on his left shoulder spun him around. The lance ripped Heartsong from his hand. The jarring impact with the ground snapped his teeth together, shutting off his terrified scream. He hadn't been aware of the noise until it stopped.

He came to rest face down in the trampled wheat. A heavy *thump* sounded nearby. Hoofbeats receded into the distance. His upper left arm and chest felt wet. They burned.

Quentin said something as he rushed to his side. Drenn's internal lecture kept Quentin's words from registering: *Watching the flight of a bolt instead of preparing your next shot makes you fool, Drenn Tillasen. It may not be your day to die, but a fool can die* any *day! Madam Yllen told you that too.*

He rolled over with Quentin's aid. The Weltruni mounts had scattered, frightened by the continued screams of the horse Drenn had shot. The Weltruni lancer lay twenty feet away, the tip of Drenn's last arrow protruding from his back. The Bridgetowner's appraising look drew Drenn's eyes unwillingly to his wounded arm. The lance had sliced the flesh of his arm and chest cleanly, a half-inch deep. Blood welled from the wounds and dripped onto the green wheat. The

sight magnified the burning he'd felt from a small fire to a raging conflagration. He hissed at the pain.

It proved to be the first of several hisses and breathless curses over the next several minutes as Quentin bound his wounds. The whole time, the lithe man apologized profusely for missing the lancer, while casting furtive glances at Drenn's silver pendant.

Quentin pulled the last binding across Drenn's chest tight, pressing Drenn's spare jerkin into the wound. Drenn had received kicks from mules that hurt less. With his wounds throbbing in time to his pulse, he limited his reaction to a grimace.

They climbed to their feet, Quentin helping Drenn by his right hand. Quentin then pointed to the pendant Drenn wore. "I've seen that before. It belonged to your cousin, Parle. He joined the muster?"

Quentin's words reminded Drenn of other fresh wounds he'd received earlier in the day, wounds to the spirit. "Yes, and now I shall have to tell his wife that the light of his life has left the world. He fell to the first band of Weltruni to win their way past our front lines."

"I'm sorry, friend. Parle was a good man, and a better archer I've never seen." His voice took on a bitter edge. "Gods and monarchs may see the point of war. I once thought I did. Today its value and meaning is lost to me. Many good men have died today." He clapped Drenn's right shoulder. "We'd best be moving on if we don't want our names added to that list.

"But first, some arrows." He stalked off toward the nearest Weltruni archer.

Drenn fondled the pendant with his right hand as he moved to retrieve Heartsong from where the lance had knocked it. The slender ring with its radiant points and the thin bar angled across its center felt fragile beneath his calloused fingers. Parle's blood on the back had dried sufficiently for some to flake off at his touch.

Bending to retrieve Heartsong reminded Drenn how wearing weeks of marching and a day of fighting had been. Every joint ached. Flexing to retrieve his bow pulled at his chest wound, lighting fresh fires of pain.

He met Quentin near the fallen archer. His slender countryman carried a sheaf of arrows. Quentin put six arrows in the quiver on Drenn's back and kept five for himself.

"You should keep the larger share," Drenn protested. "I'm not sure I could draw Heartsong anywhere near full with my arm and shoulder as they are."

"If we run into some of his countrymen," Quentin gestured to the dead horse archer, "before we can hide, I imagine your arms will remember how to draw a bow, nicked or not. And you've just proven you're the man to take the last shot – may its like never be needed again."

Quentin shook his head as they resumed their walk toward Vin's Mill. "Never have I seen a shot like that, even by your cousin in the tournament. Granted, such acrobatics aren't necessary at tourney with no one trying to kill you…. Hmmm… that reminds me; I recall Parle giving that pendant a peck for luck before dishing out his annual trouncing of us at the fair. Do you Tillasens always kiss your jewelry?"

"The pendant has been in my family since before my grandfather's day." Drenn maintained a brisk walking pace as he talked, closing the distance to the burned and flattened homes of Vin's Mill. They began climbing the broad hill on which the village was built. "Family tradition says that a forbearer won it in a tournament after joining a king's muster. Somewhere along the line, we've lost track of how many generations, how many wars, ago that was. It's a matter of pride among my kin to wear it. It does not pass from father to son, but resides with the

best archer among us. Parle bequeathed it to me with his last breath this morning. I wish he still bore it."

"As do I, friend. Though it was right that you were there to carry it away from the enemy. After Parle's sacrifice, I know of none with your skill. Your kin would agree that you've earned that."

They completed the climb to Vin's Mill in silence, frequently glancing behind them. The rolling hills to the north remained barren of men or horses. Drenn's fingers played with the pendant as he remembered his good-natured competition with Parle and his vows that one day he would wear the prized heirloom. In those days of peace, it hadn't occurred to him that there were ways, other than a tournament victory, which could lead to his desire. Could wishes make things happen? Even if it hadn't transpired the way he envisioned it, had his wish for the pendant contributed to Parle's death? *Ha! I* wish *my desires could turn fate aside. If they could, I might have some chance of surviving this war.* He slipped the pendant inside his jerkin as they entered the ruin of Vin's Mill.

"We really pounded this place yesterday." Quentin's voice sounded as flat as many of the homes around them.

"I'm glad Lord Tielbrook let the siege engines do the majority of the work driving the Weltruni vanguard out of here." Large catapult stones stood in the midst of streets or squatted among piles of sticks that had once been homes. The slaughter-day stench Drenn knew from the battlefield had ripened here, becoming a noisome reek. He pointed to a ruin of flesh that had once been a horse and blond-haired rider. The stone had made it difficult to tell where one ended and the other began. The carpet of flies that now swarmed over them complicated the puzzle further. "They paid a high price here, but it doesn't compare to the price we paid to the north today." They walked past the buzzing throng of flies.

A few minutes after entering the northern fringe of the village, they came to its center on top of the hill. Cresting the rise, Drenn saw movement to the south. He crouched and ran to the shattered wall of a home. Many catapult stones had hit the building. Jagged bases of its walls jutted at drunken angles around its collapsed roof. Quentin joined him at the northeast corner of the wreckage. A score of horsemen descended a hill a half-mile away, riding east. A quarter mile beyond them another score had just topped a rise, riding west. Both groups wore the mismatched browns of the Weltruni cavalry.

"They've strung a net to catch stragglers," Quentin said in a hollow voice. "Do you think the stories of them taking slaves to work their mines are true?"

With a parched mouth Drenn replied, "No, I don't believe those tales. The Weltruni king wants our lands, not us. I believe the other stories – that they use prisoners for target practice."

He sought options. The southern end of Vin's Mill had fewer intact buildings than the north. The Porthenin River flowed by the base of the hill. The water wheel of the town's namesake lay askew on the bank twenty yards downstream of the splintered ruins of the mill. Just upstream of the mill a bridge spanned the river, and next to it rose a two-story inn. Bodies lay thick about the inn and formed an ever-dwindling trail across the bridge and away south. Most of the bodies sported bandages in addition to gaping wounds or protruding arrows. A single Weltruni and his horse lay sprawled amidst the carnage. Drenn nodded toward the dead. "If they'd wanted prisoners, our men wounded in yesterday's fighting would have given them little trouble."

He looked to the east. The headman's house, the only other building to boast a second story, sat across the village square. Its whitewashed front appeared untouched by the pandemonium of war. He caught movement out of the corner of his eye and looked north. Large bodies of moving men and horses appeared as dark shadows flowing up and over hills. They eschewed ranks and columns, undulating in masses across the land. As he watched, a splinter erupted from one group of footsoldiers and surged ahead, disappearing behind the next rise to the south. Drenn pictured a lone Pleirkonian lying between the hills attracting the attention of the looters and said a silent prayer to Pleir, the Ever Watchful, that any of his countrymen so set upon were already dead.

"Time to go to ground, Quentin. Let's find a place to hide."

A man's voice drifted out from under the collapsed roof. "You're unlikely to find anything better than this, and we'd appreciate the company. Go around back and our hostess will show you the way in."

Drenn looked to Quentin. Now the man's shocked expression surely mirrored his own. Each waited for the other to speak first. The silence between them stretched as a rustle and a scrape sounded inside the wreckage. In the end, they both shrugged at the same time, eliciting a nervous chuckle from Drenn as they moved to the rear of the home.

The devastation of the structure appeared complete. The roof had collapsed inside the back wall of the house. A drainage ditch ran through the back of the property thirty feet distant. A fresh grave lay near its edge. Quentin led the way to the back door, looking doubtfully at the slate roof lying inside the threshold. The lowest shingles stood ten inches from the ground. The intermittent scrapes and rattles drew closer.

Quentin gestured to the north and squatted beside the door. "It won't do to hide if they see us crawl in." The Weltruni swarms had reached the rise on which they'd met. Drenn lowered himself at the man's shoulder.

They both put their heads near the ground to peer into the opening framed by the doorway and roof. Movement appeared in the shadowed interior, quickly resolving into a pair of fine-boned hands and green-clad knees ten feet inside. Their guide lowered her head to peer out at them, blinking at the relative brightness of the day. Short-cropped red hair framed a young, narrow face, highlighted by smears of dust. Her eyes tilted slightly upward at the corners, confirming the Kelvanian heritage suggested by her red hair. Her gaze slid furtively past Drenn's, taking in his clothes and weapons. "Archers? My collection of wayward soldiers nears completion." Her voice carried an odd mixture of youthful warmth and jaded coolness, seasoned with a touch of Kelvanian highland brogue. "Inside, quickly, ere the *prulk* spy you."

Drenn and Quentin straightened to their knees. As they lifted quivers off their backs and unbuckled sword belts, Quentin softly said, "A Kelvanian wench, and a comely one at that. As fine a welcoming committee as one could hope for. Those eyes … hmmmm, I might almost wish I wasn't married."

Even more quietly – experience with his mother and his wife, Beth, had convinced Drenn all women had sharp ears – he replied, "Careful of your tongue. You go first. I'll make sure we don't leave a trail."

Quentin stuffed his weapons in the opening and then half crawled, half slithered inside. Drenn noted with satisfaction that the scuffling and scraping hadn't left any discernable marks in the hard-packed clay outside the doorway. Foot traffic had long ago worn away any softness

that patch of earth may have had, leaving a base as unyielding as stone.

A many-voiced shout snapped Drenn's eyes to the north. Picturing a mob of screaming northmen pouring through the village streets, he dived for the opening, throwing his weapons in ahead of him. Only after his left arm screamed silent curses of pain at him for pulling open his wound did reason overcome panic. His blind rush slowed. He looked up after his boots had cleared the opening.

Quentin was just pulling himself to a sitting position next to the redhead. She sat near the highest point of the peaked roof, which now stood three feet off the ground. A narrow ray of sunlight, a refugee among the shadows dwelling under the collapsed roof, snuck in through a hole left by a broken shingle. It lanced to the ground between her and Quentin. In the relative glow surrounding that beam, Drenn noted that the high cheekbones typical of the Kelvani did not dominate her features. That honor was left to her eyes, ceilingless vaults of pale sky-blue, watching Quentin from the midst of a flawless angular face that flowed smoothly to a sharp chin. Her figure, just ripening into womanhood beneath her simple green trousers and blouse of finely woven cloth, provided promise that soon it would be as alluring as her eyes.

A rush of movement and a glint of light reflecting off her dagger heralded the blade's sudden appearance an inch from Quentin's nose. He flinched back and up, slamming his head against the low ceiling.

"My name is Oliandre, not 'Kelvanian wench.' I have been fending off merchants and their guards for years. Most saw reason before I bloodied them. I trust you are the reasonable kind?"

"Yes," Quentin croaked in a whisper.

She glared at Drenn as she resheathed her dagger. He acknowledged her warning with a small nod.

She turned her back to them and crawled deeper into the wreckage. Within a few feet, she had to go to her stomach to worm under a low point. Quentin silently waved Drenn to precede him. A small I-told-you-so smile crept onto Drenn's face as he squeezed by the smaller man.

The need for a guide quickly became apparent. The house, one of the largest in the village, had absorbed multiple hits from stones thrown by Pleirkonian siege engines. The wood and plaster of the interior walls lay shattered in a cloth-and-flesh-tearing jumble, adding fresh cuts on hands and knees to Drenn's list of injuries. A few slanting beams of the westering sun knifed into the ruin, illuminating tight passages or small warrens. The inevitable jostling of unstable walls as they wormed their way forward dislodged showers of dust. It soon hung thick in the air, eliciting an occasional cough.

Oliandre led them slowly through this claustrophobia-fertilizing maze. When the path branched, twice she forsook the clearer path and squeezed past openings Drenn despaired of fitting his wider frame through. Many quiet-voiced oaths slipped past his lips in moments when he feared he'd become hopelessly ensnared. Yet always he made it through, heeding Oliandre's whispered advice to avoid this protruding nail or that splintered board waiting to stab the unwary.

The winding trail terminated near the remains of the front door. A trapdoor stood open in the floor. A pale, flickering light reflected on its frame from below. Each corner of the frame sported a nail projecting an inch upward. Oliandre turned and slid into the opening feet first, taking care not to bump her head on the ceiling that stood knee-high over the opening.

After finding her footing on the cellar ladder, she held out her hand to Drenn. "Let me

pass your weapons to those below," she whispered. First his belt and scabbarded sword, then Heartsong, and finally, Oliandre disappeared below.

Drenn crawled to the opening and peered down. A lantern burned on a small crate near the base of the ladder. The cellar proved unusually large, covering the same footprint as the house over it. Stacks of barrels, casks and crates of all sizes stood along the walls and filled the southern end of the chamber.

A tall, lean man wearing leather armor, sewn over with palm-sized metal plates, looked up from near the base of the ladder. The original dark hue of his hair had retreated to the top of his head in its battle with the encroaching white. Blood and grime smattered liberally over his armor spoke of a hard day. He wore the triple knot of a senior underofficer on his shoulder. "Welcome, friend." His voice carried a slight grating, even in a soft whisper. Drenn pictured years of shouting at the men under him slowly grinding the sergeant's voice into its present rattling condition. He returned the greeting as motion near the base of the north wall drew his attention.

A bound and gagged Weltruni lay there. A short, black-haired man, his back to Drenn, had rolled the northerner onto his stomach and was in the process of checking his bonds. Oliandre stood near the eastern wall, her right hand resting lightly on the hilt of her dagger. Her gaze slid constantly between the others in the cellar.

Drenn swung about and inched his way back, raining dust and debris into the cellar. As he stood on the ladder, handing Quentin's bow down to the sergeant, he heard a company of cavalry ride into the town square from the north. A hand-spread gap between eave and front porch let him see the horses' fetlocks as they pounded by. The thud and rumble of their passage seemed to trail a beat behind, as though rushing to catch up. They disappeared as suddenly as they'd come, leaving a cloud of dust between Drenn and the mayor's house across the square.

As the thunder of hoofbeets receded to the south, the first shouts of Weltruni foot soldiers echoed among the buildings of Vin's Mill. Drenn dropped to the dirt floor of the cellar, clearing the way for Quentin, who quickly joined them.

Before Drenn could extend a hand of greeting to the sergeant, the graybeard snatched up a thick black blanket and climbed the ladder. Holding on to the ladder with one hand, he spread the blanket over the opening, skewering it on the nails protruding from the corners to keep it in place. Quentin stepped over to where the Weltruni lay bound. The black-haired man had risen to his feet and turned. His youthful face sported a neatly trimmed goatee. The small, metal badge on his chest named him an officer. As the sergeant began descending the ladder, Drenn looked from the covered opening overhead to the small lantern burning off to the side. *Our new friend thinks ahead.*

When the sergeant gained the floor and turned to him, Drenn extended his hand and introduced himself in a whisper. Outside, the wave of Weltruni broke around the ruined house and moved south.

The older man replied, "Greetings, Drenn, countryman and friend. I'm Fredrick, squadman of Lord Tielbrook's dragoons." Fredrick's voice trailed off at the end as something behind Drenn caught his eye.

Drenn turned to see Quentin pantomime drawing a bow held parallel to the ground and feint throwing himself to his left. All the while, he described the action in a low voice to the young officer and Oliandre, who had joined them to hear the tale.

As the officer and girl glanced at Drenn, Fredrick leaned closer, lowering his whisper so

that Drenn had to concentrate to catch the breathy words. "I'll be glad to have you at my side when the time comes for fighting. Before your arrival, the girl was the best backup I had."

Drenn leaned close and said in his own bare whisper, "She's mighty fast with that knife at her belt. Don't bet against her *still* being your best backup."

He and Fredrick moved to join the other three, casting shrinking shadows over them as they walked away from the light. Their steps were nearly silent on the rammed-earth floor.

As they neared the bound Weltruni, Drenn noted that an uneven veil of dried blood covered half of the man's face.

Quentin finished the tale of their arrival in Vin's Mill a moment later. The short officer turned to Drenn. "Good day, my dear fellow. I'm Ponce Rellaton the Third, Earl of Arlenford."

Drenn fisted his left hand over his heart. Ponce didn't return the salute as protocol dictated. "Your friend here was telling us about your marksmanship against the Weltruni lancers. Well done, well done." He didn't offer to shake Drenn's hand.

"A pleasure to meet you, Lieutenant."

Ponce waved a hand carelessly in Oliandre's direction. "You have met our hostess."

Drenn extended his hand to her. Her small hand seemed to disappear within his own, yet her grip proved firm. Drenn glanced around the cellar before meeting her eyes. "Your parents' house?"

"My father's."

Drenn, loath to ask the obvious question, let an awkward moment slip by. The girl broke the building silence. "He insisted on making a last trip to our store to recover some of the more valuable merchandise as the Weltruni vanguard approached. They caught him. After the *prulk* were driven away yesterday, I found him tied to a post. They'd left fourteen arrows in him."

Drenn said, "I'm sorry for your loss." Quentin muttered his condolences as Fredrick raised a hand as though to place it on her shoulder. He hesitated and then returned it to his side without touching her.

Having led the conversation into difficult terrain, Drenn felt it his duty to return it to easier ground. He made a show of craning his head around, looking into the corners of the cellar, as he asked, "Do you have any pets? A rabbit or a bird perhaps?"

"No," replied Oliandre. "Why do you ask?"

"Both make me sneeze if I'm stuck with them in tight quarters. Wouldn't want that with the enemy so close," Drenn replied, ignoring Quentin's questioning look.

Outside, a second wave of Weltruni entered the village. Officers barked orders. The uneven tromp of the enemy's march ground to a halt. Soldiers began picking bits of shattered wood from the debris over the cellar. Minutes passed as those around Drenn kept glancing upward at each noise, trying to determine if it had been closer than the last.

Casting about for a new topic, Drenn noticed that Ponce's square badge of rank, pinned to the left breast of his uniform, had been cast using gold, not the usual bronze. "May I ask what brings a member of King Volance's staff to Vin's Mill at this hour?"

"An important message for Lord Tielbrook. His Majesty and His army are near. After we received no response from earlier messengers, I left the army two days past with four others. We ran afoul of Weltruni patrols. I alone won through and arrived too late."

Oliandre pointed to Fredrick. "He claims Lord Tielbrook fell to the foe. Did you see it? Are things that bad?"

"No, I can't confirm Tielbrook's fate," said Drenn, noting Ponce grimace at his familiar usage of the noble's name. "And yes, things are that bad. Tielbrook commanded the left of our line. My company stood near the center."

"It matters no longer," said Ponce. "Alive or dead, Tielbrook threw away his force before His Majesty could join with him."

Fredrick bristled at Ponce's disparaging tone. "He followed his orders: Delay the scum as long as possible. After harrying them for a tenday, this morning it looked like we'd caught some of their infantry unsupported by horse. The group looked small enough for us to swallow whole."

Heat entered the squadman's tone. "The minute we committed, the bastards seemed to ride out from behind every hill for miles around. One of their damn horse archers killed my mount before the Duke led my mates off in an attempt to keep them from turning our flank. The Weltruni cut them off and chewed them to pieces. None of them rode clear." By the end his voice had reached a volume that made Drenn look warily at the cloth-covered opening above them.

"Yes," said Ponce. "Instead of defeating the Weltruni in detail, Tielbrook was overwhelmed. Now, His Majesty's army will take the field tomorrow badly outnumbered."

Quentin slowly patted the air in front of him with his open hand as though asking a child to slow down. "We should learn what we can from each other. Perhaps we can do something other than hide tomorrow as the fate of Pleirkon is decided."

Fredrick cooled and looked to Drenn and Quentin. "The Weltruni are not known for their use of deception in warfare. They depend on the ferocity of their men to balance their usual uninspired leadership. They've shown us something unusual in drawing the Duke into a battle he could not win. Were there other oddities to their behavior today?"

The occasional scrape and rattle of wood being drawn from the demolished home over them filtered down along with the faint scent of smoke and a quiet babble of Weltruni voices.

Quentin answered, "They paid an unusual amount of attention to archers today."

Ponce snickered. "Everyone on a battlefield believes all the foe is coming directly at him."

The officer's tone changed at the cool reception his flip remark received, slipping into that of teacher instructing raw recruits in the basics of warfare. Drenn had his fill of condescension within the first five words. "Archers make tempting targets once the fight has come to close quarters; they typically wear little armor." The officer's gaze rested on the farm clothes he and Quentin wore.

"That doesn't account for the four who came after Drenn and me. A lone rider has a death wish if he's trying to ride down an archer who sees him coming from a quarter mile off. Four to two doesn't improve their odds a great deal. There must have been something driving them."

Fredrick began, "I…"

Ponce overrode him. "Now you wish to credit the Weltruni with the ability to reason? I believe this day has been long enough. Good night gentlemen." His gaze swept over the men and settled on Oliandre. She was watching the Weltruni wriggle in his bonds and she didn't see Ponce's eyes slither slowly down her frame. He crossed to the far side of the room and sat against the wall.

A humming gurgle of attempted speech sounded through the prisoner's gag. Fredrick said, "Drenn, would you mind checking his bonds?"

Drenn knelt and rolled the Weltruni on his side, eliciting a pain-filled moan. He felt for the man's bound wrists. Thin cord remained securely in place. The man's ankles were bound with

similar cord – familiar cord.

"Bowstrings?" Drenn asked, regaining his feet. "He's an archer?"

"No," said Fredrick. "He and a friend ambushed me on the edge of town. His friend died easy. He proved a bit tougher. A glancing blow knocked him out and I found a bit of a mystery in his pockets. If I hadn't he'd now be with his friend in whatever afterlife their god provides."

The soldier held out a short piece of wood in each hand, giving them to Drenn and Quentin. A smooth, rounded end on each possessed two small notches on opposite sides; the other was roughly cut, sharp and jagged.

"The tips of a bow," growled Quentin. The Bridgetowner kicked the prisoner in the ribs. Oliandre and Drenn each grabbed one of his shoulders, forcing him back a step.

"Easy, friend," said Drenn. "You can play those games if he doesn't tell us what we want to know. I'm afraid we'll have to promise we'll do him no harm if we want him to answer our questions." Drenn said that loud enough for the Weltruni to hear and hoped the northerner spoke their language.

Fredrick straddled the man and sat on his chest facing him. Drenn and Quentin knelt to either side, leaving Oliandre at the top of the Weltruni's head. The dragoon held the tip of a dagger to the hollow at the base of the prisoner's throat. "He'll not betray us to his friends outside. Any noise louder than a whisper will be cut off before anyone can tell where it came from." He leaned close to the Weltruni's face. "That's *my* promise. Do you understand?"

The Weltruni nodded, a quick, furtive gesture. Drenn removed the gag. The prisoner worked his lower jaw around in a circle, loosening cramped muscles.

"Tell us the meaning of this, worm!" Quentin hissed as he threw the bow tip at the Weltruni's head.

The blonde man's jaw moved as though to speak, but he made no sound. He closed his mouth and cleared his throat. The sound seemed to reverberate in the dark confines of the cellar. Drenn's breath caught. Fredrick pressed the point of the dagger against the prisoner's throat in a silent warning, cutting off the noise.

The Weltruni tried again, "Thank you for giving me chance to speak. I am Harj, son of Vanath.

"I shall no betray you to the men of my home outside. I do not want war and death.

"A bounty is to be paid for proof of broken Pleirkonian bows." He looked Fredrick in the eye. "Thank you for freeing me."

"I haven't freed you," said the squadman.

At the same time Drenn and Quentin asked, "What kind of bounty?"

Harj's eyes never left Fredrick's. "Yes, you have. When you strike my head, you drive the voice of the king from it. For the first time in moons my *gothury*…my thoughts?… are mine alone."

Quentin drew his right arm back and made a fist. Oliandre placed a restraining hand on his shoulder and leaned over the Weltruni. "Speak of your king later. Tell us of this bounty on Pleirkonian bows."

"I can no tell of one without the other. King Noldru orders us into battle against the farmers and soft villagers of the South, as his great-grandsire did. 'Tis hard to earn honor in battle against those who are not a warrior race. Yet the God proclaims the need, and Noldru speaks in men's minds, pushing his wishes on them until those desires replace our own.

"Old, worthy enemies gather to east and west, and doom will visit our lands while we march through the South." Harj trailed off to silence.

Drenn well understood his concern for his homeland. Thoughts of Beth and Kaitlyn, seventy leagues to the south, distracted him, so he didn't immediately notice the tension in Fredrick's arm. He grabbed the soldier's wrist and pushed up and back until the point of the dagger eased away from Harj's throat. A small trickle of blood stained a dark ribbon down the side of the Weltruni's neck.

"Harj, belittling the fighting prowess of my countrymen may be dangerous to one in your position. Now, tell us of the bounty on bows," said Drenn.

"King Noldru – may Welt the Ever Victorious lift all honors from his shoulders – hides behind the line of battle like an old woman. Your archers are to be hunted like rabid dogs, the land cleared of them before he passes over it."

"But these dogs have far-reaching teeth, as we showed four of your countrymen a short while ago," Quentin said. "They must have known at least half of them would die, charging us as they did. What drives men to hold their lives so cheap?"

"Noldru's voice is ever in our minds, whispering of the glory of battle – a truth any true Weltruni learns while taking his first steps. The king also whispers his hatred of your archers. Many have taken this hatred into their hearts, making it their own.

"Those not fully under the king's sway will strike for the silver bounty. The bounty for two of your bows would buy me a fine horse. Your archers will receive no quarter in this war."

"You say no honor can be found fighting us, yet your king fears the bows of our farmers," said Fredrick.

"He fears the fate of his great-grandfather. Tales tell of a farmer playing dead on the field of battle waiting for Rothdirg the Fell-Fisted to pass nearby. The farmer died, but not before loosing the arrow that slew our king."

Harj suddenly tensed. His eyes widened as his breathing quickened and became shallow. "He comes!" Harj said in a soft voice. His eyes widened further as Fredrick applied pressure with the point of his dagger.

A shout of "Noldru!" rolled into the cellar and sent a shiver down Drenn's spine. It sounded as though every northerner in Vin's Mill joined in the shout.

Whispering again, Harj continued, "Noldru's voice returns to my mind. He orders the pursuit to halt for the night, and all camps to make ready to greet him."

"He'll not visit every camp his men establish tonight." Fredrick's voice carried a note of certainty that faded with his next whispered words. "He can't. Can he?"

Harj chuckled, and spoke in quick little bursts between continued shallow breaths. "No, if all camps are ready for his arrival, he will receive the proper greeting wherever he chooses to spend the night.

"This, without telling everyone where he will be.

"'Tis only common sense…

"One of his men may have been captured…

"and he would not want his enemies to know where he sleeps."

Harj now gritted his teeth. Yet his body remained relaxed.

"Harj, against what do you fight?" asked Drenn.

Harj continued, pushing words out a few at a time through clenched teeth. "The king's

voice has found me again.

"I would keep it out.

"Continue making my own decisions as I have these last hours.

"My wives and sons wait for me at home.

"There are enough dangers there.

"We no need to come south.

"I would go home.

"The voice says, 'no'."

A low growl, slowly growing in volume, issued from the Weltruni.

"No, don't make me do this." Desperation laced Fredrick's words.

"Kill him before he gives us away!" hissed Ponce from across the room.

Drenn cast frantically about for the discarded gag. The volume of Harj's feral growl continued to rise; it now competed with the sounds of his countrymen outside.

Oliandre wedged the gag home. Drenn reached to help. Her hands leapt away.

Drenn secured the gag. It appeared that every muscle in Harj's frame had tensed, but he made no move to resist. "Good work, Oliandre. You kept a clear head."

Across the room Ponce issued a soft 'harrumph.'

Oliandre retreated to the nearest corner and asked, "Can their king really speak in the minds of his subjects?"

Drenn directed his words to Fredrick who still straddled Harj's chest. "You have our northern friend here?"

"Yes. What say you to us keeping three watches tonight? I'll go first, then Quentin, and then you."

Drenn said, "Agreed." The squadman had been considerate enough to state it as a suggestion, not using his rank to make it an order.

Quentin echoed Drenn's assent. Drenn turned and started to crawl toward Oliandre. Soft scuffing noises and a whispered exchange between Quentin and Fredrick sounded behind him as they sorted themselves out for the first watch.

"Sorry, Oliandre, for keeping you waiting," he said. With the lamp behind him, he could barely make out her outline in the shadowed corner. His hand came down on her cold, bare foot. She jerked it back violently. The scrape of the foot across the grit-covered floor nearly covered the sound of her drawing her dagger.

Drenn eased back and sat down. "You've nothing to fear from me." He shook his head. "My wife, Beth, will scold me something terrible when I tell her how I just scared you. I know what you fear, alone with four, dirty, blood-streaked men.

"When you become a parent, you'll find that nightmares and dreams for your children come in equal measure. I have a daughter half your age waiting for me to return home. My imagination has presented me with myriad dark possibilities that might result should the Weltruni overrun my home. I would sooner die than perpetrate the violation I fear happening to my daughter. I walked north with the army prepared to die to prevent it.

"I'll let nothing happen to you while I live. Do you believe me?" He held out his hands, palms up in a gesture of openness.

Several seconds passed before Oliandre said, "When the lightning flashes and thunder cracks, do you let your daughter sleep with you?"

"Yes," he said without hesitation. "Though it's now been a couple of summers since she asked. As they grow up, little girls leave some fears behind, sometimes even faster than their fathers – who find no greater fulfillment in life than keeping back the shadows – would wish."

"I believe you." The sound of metal sliding over leather preceded the click of her dagger being seated in its sheath. "You may sit by me."

"Thank you." He moved to sit beside her. The rough wall of the cellar felt cool against his back. She shivered at his side.

"You questioned Noldru's power to speak into the minds of his subjects. Do you not believe in the magic of royalty?"

"What evidence have I seen of magic? The success of each year's crop? Perhaps the weather is naturally benign, and King Volance does nothing but sit upon his throne and collect taxes."

Drenn laughed, soft and low. "You believe your elders' tales of the Dry Summer to be nothing but fairy tales? I was but a few years younger than you are now, and well do I remember the last coronation. For the three months the throne remained empty, not a drop of rain fell within the borders of Pleirkon. The rains returned on the day of Volance's ascension, and the mildest winter I have ever experienced ensued, yet many people still died of hunger. The power the gods grant kings is real."

Drenn felt more than saw her shake her head. "All I've ever known is life in my father's store. Until this spring, Weltrune never seemed a threat, just an exotic land of short summers. I never heard of their king bending the will of the people to his goal. If it is real, that power seems far removed and eerily stronger than King Volance's domination of the weather."

Now Drenn shook his own head. "Consider the price they pay in order to make war: I've heard that the Weltruni deal with weather that I find difficult to believe: Wind-driven snowfalls that last for days, leaving drifts as tall as a horse's withers; cold that can kill an unprotected man in a matter of minutes; and summer storms that cause rivers to overflow their banks.

"Welt the Bloodthirsty is a ruthless, militaristic god, and his people do their best to imitate him. Fortunately for the Twenty Kingdoms, the lands devoted to the triumvirate of war neighbor each other. And best for us – Weltrune lies sandwiched between the other two. Some say Weltruni are born knowing how to fight. They spend a great deal of time fighting each other, defending their honor against the smallest of perceived slights. My squadman used to say that if they ever learned to fight as a unit instead of for personal glory, the Weltruni would sweep over us in a week."

"Is that all that keeps our land free – their wars with their neighbors and amongst themselves?"

"I don't think so. They've repeatedly tried to flatten Pleirkon. We've thrown them back every time. Often it's been a mystery as to how, as most of the battles end with them in control of the field. Pleir is not a war-monger god, but he has found a means to protect his people."

"Let's hope that whatever miracle he has in store, he sends it quickly. I shall quickly tire of living in a cellar."

"I find something I can agree with, at last," Drenn replied.

They talked for a time of Beth, Kaitlyn, and Oliandre's father. Oliandre proved to be a fair storyteller, making the routine of operating their store seem a continuous adventure of meeting new people and encountering new goods produced in far-off cities. She was the perfect audience

for Drenn's tales of life on his farm; her youth set him to thinking about the young woman Kaitlyn would soon be. Then, when such thoughts gave his stories and boastings a melancholy edge, she demonstrated a calm maturity, placing her hand over his when tears brimmed in his eyes.

All too soon, the trials of the day caught up with Drenn. The tension of fighting, running and hiding had been all that kept his exhaustion at bay. Given the chance to relax, he slipped from drowsily considering how heavy his limbs suddenly seemed into deep slumber in the middle of one of Oliandre's stories. A last thought bubbled to the surface as he slid into the depths of sleep: *There's no rabbit in here with us. I'll live at least one more day.*

He woke to total darkness and someone shaking his leg gently. Quentin said, "That's all the beauty rest you'll get tonight. Your turn to watch, if that is indeed the proper term when nothing can be seen."

As he sat up – he didn't remember lying down – with the wall at his back, two blankets slid off his torso. Early morning chill sliced through the warmth in which he'd slumbered. Every muscle involved in pulling the blankets back up registered a protest. Those that hadn't stiffened while he slept were slow to shake off their slumber. His left bicep and chest brought him to full alertness with stabbing pains that had him drawing hissing breaths through clenched teeth.

"Your chest wound?" Quentin asked. "I'll replace the dressing on that come first light. Unless you'd rather have your new friend do it for you?"

Drenn reached out to the left. Oliandre wasn't within reach. "Where'd she go?"

"Oh, so maybe I do have something to tell Beth," Quentin whispered in mock challenge. "After you fell asleep, she covered you up as if she were tucking in an old man or newborn babe. Then she blew out the lantern, lowered the blanket from the trapdoor so a bit of fresh air might find its way in, and bedded down at the foot of the ladder."

A soft snore sounded from across the room. "That's his lordship, Ponce. The noise comes and goes. It hasn't been loud enough to carry outside so I've let him sleep. He's likely to be insufferable tomorrow on any account, and I don't see the point in adding lack of sleep to his list of excuses for being in a foul mood."

"Has Harj been any trouble?"

"No. He fell asleep before you, and has hardly stirred." Quentin issued a long, sighing yawn and said, "You going to stay awake now if I stretch out and go to sleep?"

"Yeah, go ahead. If I feel myself start to doze, all I have to do is move my left arm, and the pain will keep me awake."

"Heh, who'd have guessed that lancer might have been doing you a favor by giving you that little nick."

"Quentin…"

"Sorry… I know when I've over-stayed my welcome. Mark my words though: In a couple of weeks when you're resting at home and about healed up, you'll think back to this and think that was funny. Good night."

A shuffle, scrape and a soft clatter marked Quentin's passage through the ebon night to his pallet of blankets. A pair of northmen shared a late night fire near enough for their voices to occasionally drift down to Drenn's ears. Periodic shouts came from the perimeter of Vin's Mill – the Weltruni's sentries reporting that all remained quiet.

Time slipped by very slowly. Pleasant memories of his wife and daughter nearly allowed

sleep to take him unaware.

He began waving his left arm about, gritting his teeth and welcoming the little blossoms of pain that bloomed and died in the wounds with each cautious swing. After alternating periods of movement and rest for over an hour, Drenn raised his arm and received a pleasant surprise – the pain of his wounds had lessened along with the stiffness.

The darkness remained absolute. The strain of trying to see without the benefit of the smallest trace of light tired Drenn's eyes. He began closing them while he stretched his arms, and opening them while sitting still. Finally, he opened his eyes and beheld fine gradients of shadow. The opening in the ceiling had lightened to a soft gray. The black mound at the base of the ladder would be Oliandre. Everything else remained in darkness. She slept on her back with her head toward Drenn. Her feet trailed into shadow on the other side of the cellar. He settled back and waited for dawn to reveal another day. Ponce's snoring stopped.

A hint of movement to his right preceded Ponce's soft call. "Is anyone awake?"

Drenn didn't move, curious about what the young noble would do.

Soft rustling preceded Ponce's appearance by the ladder. He moved slowly, looking furtively around as he closed with Oliandre. Drenn had watched Kaitlyn sneaking to the cupboard in which the sweets were kept with the same guilt-ridden gate.

Drenn's pulse quickened. He nearly acted before logic prevailed over outrage. Ponce hadn't done anything yet, and would simply deny any accusation of intent. The noble needed just a little more rope with which to hang himself. Drenn let the seconds slip by, giving Ponce the slack he needed.

The nobleman knelt next to her. His left hand covered her right on top of the blanket. He reached up with his right to caress her cheek and leaned in to kiss her.

Outside, a company of Weltruni horsemen arrived with a clatter of hooves and guttural calls of greeting. Drenn started to rise; Ponce had taken this far enough. The blanket at Oliandre's left side slowly crested and subsided. As Ponce's lips closed the last inch to hers, Oliandre's left arm shot straight out from her side, sliding clear of the blanket. It darted back in, dagger leading. Ponce emitted a startled "Ah!" as he threw himself back.

Drenn quelled the desire to scream, instead hissing, "Quiet!"

Ponce fended off the dagger. He rolled away grasping his right hand as Oliandre sat up and Drenn moved between them. Quentin and Fredrick whispered "What's happening?" and "Quiet!" as they came to their feet.

"You stupid wench!" Shock and anger vied for dominance in Ponce's voice. "You dare assault a Rellaton? I shall teach you your place!" He reached for the hilt of his sword and grasped only air; his scabbarded blade leaned against the wall behind him. He backed a step toward it.

Quentin and Fredrick proved quicker. Their blades hissed from their scabbards as they came to Drenn's side. Oliandre maintained her position by the ladder, holding her dagger in front of her.

Fredrick addressed Ponce, who'd stopped short of picking up his sword, "I think I already know the answer, but tell me anyway – what did you do to earn that?" He gestured to Ponce's tightly fisted right hand. Blood dripped from between the fingers.

"I did nothing but try to honor the girl with my attentions."

"Excuse me?" said Quentin, incredulous. "Unsought advances are not 'honors'…. Call them what they are: 'assaults'."

"Any of the wenches serving at my estate…"

"How dare you…" hissed Oliandre as Fredrick advanced a step.

The squadman's voice rose to a threatening growl, "Hold your tongue, fop, unless you want it carved out!"

Drenn couldn't deny that the thought of Ponce being brought down from on high held a great deal of appeal. Still, they didn't dare come to blows. He stepped forward and placed a restraining hand on Fredrick's sword arm. "Don't you think we should be spending our time thinking about how we can help the king against the Weltruni today, instead of fighting amongst ourselves?" he asked in his best conciliatory tone.

Ponce spun and stalked away from them and his weapon, to an empty corner. "It wasn't bad enough that the king appointed me Chief Hare; now not only do I miss my chance to fight at his side, I must concern myself with the desires of commoners."

A tingle flashed up Drenn's spine as every nerve came suddenly, completely awake. "What did you say?" Time seemed to slow as he waited for Ponce to turn around. The noble's quick turn seemed to consume a lifetime.

"You take offense? Fine, commoner. If you demand satisfaction, when this is over…"

"No. Your opinion of me and mine matters nothing to me. What did you say about hares?"

Ponce snorted softly and squinted at Drenn. His expression appeared bemused, as though he was trying to fathom some jest Drenn had made. Drenn made no clarification. He knew the answers he would receive to this question and his next.

His day to die had dawned.

A sudden flurry of harsh, seemingly rushed, orders sounded outside. A large contingent of cavalry came thundering into the town square.

As the noise outside subsided, Ponce smiled and assumed the lecturing tone Drenn had heard the night before. The tone one might assume in explaining something to a child – a slow child – dripped condescension. "His majesty's couriers go haring across the kingdom, delivering his orders. People name others for their actions, archer. The couriers are known to many" – Drenn heard 'who possess a modicum of intelligence' in the undertone of Ponce's words. – "as hares. I command them. Therefore, I am Pleirkon's Chief Hare."

Blood continued to drip from between the noble's fingers. *Yes, that would count as a scratch.*

Drenn turned and met Oliandre's blue eyes. "Your name is beautiful. I have never heard it before."

"Drenn, what are you …" Quentin began. Drenn forestalled him with an upraised hand.

Never taking his eyes from the girl's, he asked, "Is it a Kelvanian name?"

"Yes."

"Does it have an equivalent in Pleirkonian?"

"My mother named me for the bird that perched in the tree outside her window while she labored with my birth. I am named for the dove."

Drenn closed his eyes and drew a deep breath. He went from fully alert, every nerve feeding him sensations faster than he could sort through them, to absolutely numb. Turning inward, he again heard Madam Yllen's age-cracked voice as he had so often in his nightmares. She'd foretold this day twelve years earlier: *At dawn's first light, you'll see a dove scratch a rabbit. On that day you shall face a choice – your death or the fall of Pleirkonian freedom.*

Carriage wheels clattered across the flagstones in the village square and stopped.

Drenn had thought he'd accepted his fate. He'd been wrong. Over twelve years of living with impending doom he'd repeatedly cycled between acceptance, denial and avoidance of the prophecy.

Now, the waiting had come to an end. All that remained was discovering how his death might serve to save his home. He took a deep breath to loosen some of the tightness in his chest, and opened his eyes.

Oliandre and Quentin had knelt so that they could be at eye level with him. Fredrick stood between them and Ponce, his hand on the hilt of his sword. Drenn wasn't aware he'd sunk to his knees, until he realized that Oliandre's and Quentin's hands on his shoulders was all that kept him from falling flat on the ground.

A tremendous shout of "Noldru!" sounded from outside. It sounded as if it came from thousands of throats in and around Vin's Mill. The throng repeated the call twice more before giving itself over to random, raucous cheering. Drenn welcomed the stunned silence the noise outside induced in those around him; it allowed him a moment to bring his scattered thoughts back to the here and now.

"Easy, friend," said Quentin, as the noise outside subsided to the continuous rumble of an army preparing for action. "For a moment there we thought you'd fainted."

Fredrick moved to the ladder and climbed it, slowly raising his eyes above the level of the trapdoor and looking toward the home's ruined front door.

"Are your injuries worse than we thought?" asked Oliandre, reaching for the dressing on his chest.

"No. Actually, they feel much better today. I will explain in a moment."

Fredrick descended the ladder after only a few seconds and moved to join them.

"And I believe I now know the answer to the question that has been plaguing me for twelve years," Drenn continued as he turned to the dragoon. "Fredrick, I assume that welcome was for the Weltruni king."

"They're certainly treating some over-dressed popinjay as if he's royalty. Add in the fact that he's wearing a silver crown and I'd say that's Noldru. The bastard went into the village headman's house across the square."

The turmoil in Drenn's mind settled as his path forward revealed itself in full. He gestured to Fredrick to join them, and nearly invited Ponce to as well. However, one look at the noble sulking in the corner convinced him the young fop had played his part, and he left the invitation unvoiced.

"Today I will die," he began, surprised that the serenity in his voice matched what he felt deep inside. "Before I die, I will kill King Noldru." He told them of Madam Yllen's prophecy. As he spoke, command trumpets sounded throughout the Weltruni camp.

As he explained, the initial, shocked expressions on Quentin's and Fredrick's faces slowly settled to looks of grim acceptance. Oliandre looked more pained by the moment.

"No. You can't do this," she finally said. "The Weltruni won't find us down here. King Volance will be victorious today and everything will be fine. Don't throw your life away because the actions of a pompous fool appear to match the ramblings of an old woman. Don't do it because of what he tried to do to me!"

"Oh, Oliandre, have you not heard what I said? I *know* I'm *not* throwing my life away.

Pleir in his wisdom has given me this opportunity to fend off the Weltruni before they come near my home. He gave Madam Yllen the vision so that I would know to act when the time came. No blame falls to you or anyone else. You should be credited with showing me the time has come to act. Having been shown the path, it is my choice alone to make."

"Drenn, you are certain of this?" Quentin asked.

"Yes."

"How do you propose to accomplish it?" asked Fredrick. The veteran's expression revealed no doubts.

"The village will be nearly empty when the Weltruni battle King Volance to the south today." As he spoke, gruff voices barked orders outside. "If Harj spoke the truth, and I believe he has, King Noldru will avoid the front lines and watch the contest from here. When most of his men have left," – He swept his left arm around in a broad arc that ended with him pointing south, as a thunder of booted feet and iron-shod hooves began rolling off in that direction. His breath caught for only a split second as he pushed down the pain that flared in his wounds – "I'll relocate to another ruined house and wait for my opportunity."

"I'll come with you to make sure you get your chance," said Fredrick.

"And I," Quentin chimed in over the last of the veteran's words, sending him a heated glance, as though angry over having been beaten to volunteering.

"No. Both of you will stay here. Whoever comes with me won't be coming back, and Oliandre needs some company. Besides, two are more likely to be spotted than one. I'll get my shot."

Drenn reached inside his shirt and brought out the silver pendant. He closed his eyes and slowly brought it to his lips. A wave of warmth poured through him, relaxing stiff muscles and soothing the worst of the sting of his wounds. When he opened his eyes, his vision seemed sharper, the gloom in the cellar less.

He lifted the chain over his head and held it out to Oliandre. "I would like you to take this to Beth. Tell her how we talked last night. If you decide not to rebuild your father's store, I'm sure she would appreciate the help you could give her with the farm."

The girl reached out with both hands and cupped them under the pendant. They felt chill to Drenn as he lowered the spiked silver circle into them. Oliandre's eyes never left his as she lowered her arms, the chain of the pendant trailing from her right hand. "I swear I shall deliver it. I will tell her and Kaitlyn of your bravery, and do what little I can to comfort them." She closed with him and wrapped her arms around his waist and laid her head on his chest. He returned the embrace, momentarily losing himself in the feel of her under his hands. The young woman's hair felt as fine, her skin as soft as his daughter's, and he imagined himself hugging Kaitlyn.

The bitterness of loss battled the sweetness of reconfirmed conviction as he gently pushed her to arms' length. "Thank you, Oliandre, for all that you have done. I pray that you shall live a long and happy life."

The tromp and clatter of moving men through the streets outside had faded from an omnipresent thunder to a distant rumble. Drenn stepped to where Heartsong and Quentin's bow leaned against the wall. He hefted the weapons and turned. Heartsong outstripped the other bow by two hands. Its wood, oiled and polished to a fine patina, made Quentin's serviceable bow appear a cheap counterfeit of the bowyers' art.

He held Heartsong out to Quentin.

"No, Drenn. I can't accept this," Quentin protested.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to borrow your bow, and it's not likely to be serviceable after the Weltruni are finished with it. In payment, take Heartsong. Let it sing to you in tournaments for many years to come. When gray lies heavy upon your head and Heartsong's pull is beyond your arms, pass her on to one of your boys. She is truly unique. May she never see another war."

"It is too great a gift…"

"I insist. If you deem Heartsong ill-balanced by what I ask, then I shall ask for more: Look in on my lady and my girl from time to time. Beth is tough, and will make the farm work well enough to support her and Kaitlyn. Yet, some of the work will remain beyond her strength. My spirit shall find greater peace knowing that the occasional, heavy task will be tended to."

The lithe man finally reached out and accepted Heartsong with his left hand, and clasped Drenn's tightly with his right. "I would do so without any payment. Your ladies shall want for nothing that me and mine can provide."

"Thank you," Drenn said, and turned to Fredrick. "I would ask a favor."

"Anything within my power to give." Every line of the dragoon's frame displayed tension, like a bow at full draw.

"No, Fredrick, I have not changed my mind. I do not wish anyone coming with me. Men's lives should not be spent to no purpose." The dragoon's shoulders slumped slightly and he let forth a long sigh. Happy that Fredrick hadn't chosen to argue the point, Drenn continued, "When it is safe to do so, I ask you to free Harj. Let him return to his family. This war has created enough widows."

Fredrick's gray eyes widened as they locked with Drenn's. Drenn met the gaze coolly. After a score of heartbeats, Fredrick nodded and said, "The Weltruni didn't want to be here. Perhaps he will share the story of what he has seen. Once his kin hear about the sort of men that Pleirkon produces, they will tremble at the thought of ever coming south again."

A chill raced down Drenn's spine at the thought that word of what he was about to do would spread. "I have another favor to ask of all of you." He looked to each of them in turn. "Tell no one outside my family what transpired here this morning. The Weltruni king ordered his men to pay special attention to our archers in this campaign because he feared the fate of his great-grandfather. If his son discovers my name, my family would be in great danger even in times of peace. Let Weltruni kings fear every Pleirkonian farmer with a bow."

They all agreed to keep his secret, sharing it only with Beth and Kaitlyn so that they might know he had sold his life dearly.

By the time Drenn had selected the best five arrows from his and Quentin's quivers, the noise of the Weltruni departure had dwindled to an occasional distant shout or rapid tattoo of a single running horse. Drenn climbed the ladder and looked out toward the village headman's house. Two guards wearing steel breastplates over uniforms of brown and green stood at attention to either side of the door. Four others lounged nearby. Five horses bearing ornate saddles and barding that appeared more decorative than functional stood hitched to a rail near the door. A dozen mounts with less elaborate tack stood at a nearby rail.

Drenn looked down and caught Quentin's eye. "The time has come. Hand me my weapons." After piling his bow, quiver and sword on the floor beside the trap door, Drenn looked back to the three who had gathered around the base of the ladder. Fredrick's gray eyes had gone as hard

as stone, his face rigid. In the dim light filtering down from above Drenn thought he saw a tear glisten at the corner of the veteran's right eye. Fredrick fisted his left hand and placed it over his heart in salute. Drenn gave a single nod to accept the honor and bid farewell.

Quentin looked up through squinting eyes. He was sucking in his cheeks and furrowing his brow as though he'd just bitten into something sour and was worried that it might be poisonous. He said, "Now don't be taking Madam Yllen's words completely at face value. You do what you need to and then go to ground. The Weltruni who aren't slow of mind are likely to be blind. Move quick, and they'll never find you." His face smoothed and he took a deep breath before saying, "May Pleir the All-Wise watch over you now and for all time."

Oliandre stood in the dim light coming in through the trapdoor, her blue eyes open so wide that Drenn imagined them to be pools he might dive into, leaving the insanity of war behind. She looped the chain holding his silver pendant over her head and clutched the pendant to her heart with both hands. "Here it will stay until I return it to your wife. Tales will be told for all time of the nameless man who stopped a king and war, relying more on his courage than his weapons."

By main force of will, Drenn pushed down the lump that had risen in his throat. His goodbye still caught on what seemed very sharp brambles in his throat. "Thank you all. I ask just one thing more of each of you – survive. Survive this insanity and live long, quiet lives. Raise your children and grandchildren well. Be at peace."

He turned away from the last friendly faces he would ever see and climbed out the trapdoor. He worked his way carefully through the warren of small debris-filled chambers that had been Oliandre's house and came to the back door.

He listened, slowing his breathing so that it would not interfere with his hearing. He heard nothing over the thunderous beat of his pulse.

He crawled cautiously toward the opening. The view opened slowly before him, the wrecked village and remnants of a score of Weltruni campfires framed by the ruin of the doorway. A hint of movement at the left edge of his vision made him stop, tensing every muscle to absolute stillness. His breath escaped in a soft sigh when a cat moved furtively between two collapsed houses.

A minute later, he crouched outside the doorway. The eastern half of Vin's Mill appeared deserted. Companies and regiments of Weltruni had formed up south of town and were advancing toward a line of blue five miles distant. There on a ridge waited the Pleirkonian army. The glints of light reflecting from armor and weapons along the ridgeline gave the perception of a river flowing along the crest. Dust clouds rose at either end as the cavalry of Pleirkon rode out to keep the northerners' horsemen from flanking the line. The Weltruni infantry in the middle swarmed southward.

Drenn moved south to the corner of Oliandre's house and looked further south for cover that would allow him to see the village square. Fire had consumed the next two houses, reducing the nearer to a pile of ash and leaving the brick walls of the next a hollow, roofless shell. The drainage ditch that passed near Oliandre's house tracked a straight path behind both. He noted a small bush growing on the lip of the ditch behind the second house.

He crouched and scurried to the ditch, keeping Oliandre's collapsed house between him and the guards across the square. A thin layer of clinging mud at the bottom of the ditch greeted Drenn when he threw himself into it. He discovered that the ditch was shallower than he'd estimated, standing only half a hand above his head when he lay prone.

He crawled along the ditch, pushing his weapons ahead, bracing hands and elbows in the mud before him and his toes behind, and pulling himself along. He dared to advance no more than a hand's-breadth at a time lest he rear above the lip of the ditch. Mud worked its way inside his shirt and the waist of his pants, chilling him. His wounded shoulder began to knot halfway to the bush. While cognizant of the pain and discomfort, he remained somehow beyond it. His thoughts drifted to happy times with Beth – their wedding, the birth of Kaitlyn – as he mechanically went through the motions: *push – brace – pull, push – brace – pull.*

The ten minutes needed to come even with the landmark bush managed to achieve the dichotomy of seeming to last forever and ending sooner than he'd expected. Propping himself on his elbows, he raised his eyes above the lip of the ditch and looked through the bush towards the village square. The blackened brick walls of the burned out house screened him from the guards.

He left the ditch and crawled to the back of the house, never leaving his stomach. He pulled himself to a sitting position underneath an empty window frame. As he began raising his head to look inside, a scuffing footstep sounded within. Drenn crouched lower beneath the window, praying to Pleir that he hadn't risen enough to reveal the top of his head through the window. The footsteps drew nearer before stopping abruptly just on the other side of the wall.

Drenn cursed himself silently for a fool; he should have left the scabbard of his sword behind. He dared not slide the weapon free now, lest the noise be heard; yet if the Weltruni came out the back doorway, the second required to free the blade would allow the northerner to raise the alarm.

A small splashing sounded from within. Drenn clenched his jaw and schooled his breathing to keep a startled laugh from escaping. A fraction of the tension knotting his muscles and gut loosened as he waited for the soldier to finish relieving himself and return to the village square. After the footsteps receded, Drenn waited a full minute before peering around the doorframe.

An uneven blanket of ash covered the ground inside the soot-blackened walls. Taller mounds stood here and there, the remnants of interior walls or heavy furnishings. A fitful southerly breeze wafted into the building, forming a short-lived cyclone of ash. The front of the house boasted an empty window frame to either side of the door. Drenn crawled through the ash toward the right-hand window. He moved very slowly so as to minimize the chance of stirring up a betraying gray cloud.

When he was halfway through the ash, many voices suddenly barked orders in front of the mayor's house, followed within a few heartbeats by a shout of "Noldru!" from a score of throats. The clatter of hooves prodded him to quickly move the last few feet to the wall.

Ash cascaded from the creases of his clothes as he stood in the corner of the house and strung Quentin's bow. A gust of wind carried some of the ash up and over the wall and out the window. He held his breath, waiting for the shout of alarm. When none came in a count of five, he leaned his sword and four of his arrows against the wall under the window.

He nocked the remaining arrow and stood back from the wall. The southern end of the village square stood framed by the blackened, empty window. No Weltruni were in sight. He held the arrow against the bow with one finger of his left hand, the point aimed at the ground, and lightly massaged his left arm and chest with his right hand. The massage did little to loosen the cramping wounds.

Several horses nickered as though complaining at being mounted. A swelling babble of

voices preceded another shout of "Noldru!"

Drenn brought the bow up and began to draw back. The automatic, fluid motion, as natural as breathing after thousands of draws, would bring the fletching to his ear as the bow reached full draw. But at half-draw the muscle on the left side of his chest hitched. A breathy "Aaahh!" escaped him as he relaxed the draw on the bow.

Whistles and shouts heralded the tattoo of galloping hooves on cobblestones. The first of the Weltruni, guardsmen in plain armor, rode through the square past Drenn's window.

Drenn's wounds throbbed in time to his quickening pulse. He thrust his left arm out and locked his elbow and shoulder. Two Weltruni officers, feathers crowning their short conical caps, entered and left his line of sight between breaths. He hauled back on the bowstring. All of his breath hissed through his teeth as the gash on his chest pulled open.

Three more riders came into view. Drenn held his arm steady, stilling a tremble by sheer force of will, and let the men ride into his line of fire. A glint of early morning sunshine reflected off silver worn at a brow. The tip of the arrow came up a hair's-breadth. Drenn loosed.

He didn't watch the flight of the arrow, knowing it would find its mark.

As he retrieved another arrow, the loudest shout yet of "Noldru!" sounded from every Weltruni in Vin's Mill, echoed a moment later by a great wave of sound from the south. The gray-haired Weltruni nobles riding to either side of Noldru had reined in their horses when the arrow struck, leaving them in Drenn's field of vision. The two troopers riding behind, slower to pull back on their reins, nearly collided with them before bringing their horses to a stop.

For Drenn, the two-step process of locking his left arm out in front of him and hauling back on the bowstring took a second longer than his customary drawing and aiming in a single motion. Still, he loosed his second arrow before Noldru finished sliding from his horse. When Drenn looked up to select his third shot, Noldru hit the ground bonelessly. His silver crown rolled away, clattering over the cobblestones. The first noble he'd targeted fell from his horse a second later.

The horsemen had spotted him. The two troopers turned their mounts in his direction as the second noble dismounted to attend his king. Drenn's arrow struck him as he bent over to examine the king's wound. He fell lifeless on top of Noldru.

Boot heels clopped on cobblestones, closing on Drenn's hiding place from the direction of the headman's house. He stepped to the other side of the window as he picked up his next arrow. Four dragoons charged across the square with their swords drawn. Oaths and curses mixed with wordless cries of outrage poured from them. Two more stood back by the headman's house, staring blankly at Noldru's corpse. One of those charging had pulled a step ahead of the others. Drenn's arrow took him in the face thirty paces away.

Drenn felt somehow numb, yet more full of life than he'd ever felt before, as his fingers closed on his last arrow. With his purpose fulfilled and Beth and Kaitlyn safe, he would defend himself as best he could. He stepped away from the window and put his back to the corner of the house.

The first dragoon came through the doorway. Drenn's last arrow tore through his throat. He staggered sideways and fell. His fellows who'd charged across the courtyard on foot entered before he'd fully settled into the ash. The two horsemen were a moment behind.

Drenn raised his sword…

* * *

Oliandre wiped away the tears that had been blurring her vision, and watched as two Weltruni dragoons carried Noldru's body into the headman's house. A third, bearing knots of rank the others lacked and holding the king's crown, paused outside to talk with the two who had remained by the house. They stared off into the distance, making no sign that they heard him. She'd been watching them since their comrades had charged across the square after Drenn. They'd stood as still as posts the entire time. The underofficer began shouting, waving the crown in their faces. Still receiving no response, he backhanded each across the cheek.

An argument ensued in which the two kept gesturing to the north. The shouting rose to a crescendo before the pair turned their back on the underofficer and began walking home. He carefully set the crown by the door before going after them, drawing his sword as he went. They were beyond Oliandre's line of sight before the first clash of sword on sword echoed through the village square. Some of the ice around Oliandre's heart thawed. *Drenn, you were right. Without their king, many want to go home.*

The crown, a broad silver circlet with six, no, seven points, drew her attention. *Seven silver points – where have I seen the like?* Letting go of the ladder with one hand, she reached inside her blouse and brought Drenn's pendant up to examine it. It was a thin silver circle an inch in diameter. Seven evenly spaced points radiated from its outer edge. A fine, silver wire spanned across the center of the ring. Oliandre had missed some details in the dim light of the cellar – the spanning line broadened near both ends. One end was engraved with a small triangle; the other bore a series of close-set angled lines – the stylized point and fletching of an arrow. *Noldru should have stayed home.*

The Weltruni underofficer never returned to pick up the crown. It remained by the door as the first Weltruni, traveling singly or in small groups, retreated north through Vin's Mill. As the stream of retreating men became a torrent, an officer stopped long enough to pick up the crown and place it in a saddlebag before continuing on.

* * *

Thirty-five years ago you were both here, Nigel Shloe thought of his grandfathers. Quentin had taught him to handle a bow at the age of four and passed Heartsong on to him when he'd come of age at sixteen. Vin's Mill, the setting of many stories told by his parents, grandparents and aunt Oliandre was receding to the southeast. He touched the silver pendant hanging about his neck. It played a role in a tale his elders had promised to tell him upon his return.

A quiver bristled on his back. Two arrows, the best examples of the fletchers' art he'd found in sorting through thousands of shafts over the last five years, resided in a separate quiver at his belt, behind his scabbarded sword.

His parents had insisted he visit the daughter and then granddaughter of Madam Yllen. Both had foreseen the same the thing: Amidst the tumult of battle, his quiver would hang hollow on his back and he would see a sign. He would then need to move with all haste east and need one arrow to save Pleirkon. A second arrow would save him.

With a northerly breeze cooling his face, and the dust of the lead companies in his mouth, he approached the battlefield. Thousands would die this day. He would not be among them so

long as he retained his wits and kept watch for the sign.

He'd always thought a cat chasing a dog an odd thing to find on a battlefield. His grandfather, Quentin, had assured him he'd seen more exotic things.

The End

Leave a note for the author on our Message Boards

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February 27, 2002

Moore rapped his knuckles on Jane's desk to get her attention. "I gave you the files you needed, right?" he asked.

Without waiting for her answer, Moore turned to the company vice president, Neiman, with an ingratiating smile on his thick lips. "I'm sure the paperwork is ready."

Jane gagged on the sour taste in her mouth. She stared disbelievingly around the office. She could not be here, in the middle of a workday. It was impossible. Moore had personally handed her the pink slip yesterday.

"It's just that I've had trouble in the past from your department, Mr. Moore," Neiman was saying. The two of them stood in the doorway of Jane's cubicle. "This is an important client, you know. We're insuring a major company here. I want to make sure…"

Jane stared at Neiman as he spoke words she faintly remembered him saying. This was like reliving a recording.

She realized that her hand was clamped tightly around a hard shape: The bottle. Her reflection was haloed by the fluorescent office lights, but she saw that her hair was neatly combed and held back by a barrette. She hadn't bothered this much with her hair since Jim had walked out.

And her blouse! She looked down at herself to make certain. This blouse had been ruined by a huge bleach stain, courtesy of a counter at the Laundromat. Now it was perfect. It looked new.

"Jane? Jane, hello. I'm asking you a question."

She gave a start, but she knew the question even without paying attention. She had already lived this day two years ago.

"I asked you if the Stanley paperwork is finished," said Moore, as though speaking to a child. His blue eyes were like blades. He wanted her to say yes; or at worst, that she would have it done by the end of the workday. Jane remembered telling him exactly what he wanted to hear.

Licking her lips and looking from boss to boss, she considered playing her part of this memory. She had an urge to assure them that the paperwork was nearly finished. It was in her best interest to please them.

"Are you all right?" Neiman squinted at her in concern, leaning over the cubicle wall.

Jane hid the bottle beneath her desk. She might lose her job faster this time, unless she could distract them. "I haven't even started on the Stanley paperwork," she said, staring directly at Moore, "because I never received word that I should be working on it."

For a moment, Moore looked like a fish gulping water. He made a quick recovery. "I *did* give her the files," he chuckled, glaring at her murderously. "I had them all in a folder. My secretary should have carried them right over here." He smiled tightly. "I'll talk to Elise and see what she says."

"Please do," said Neiman. "I want those files by five o'clock today. Give it to her," he gestured to Jane, "or someone else, but please get it done." He strolled away.

Moore hurried after his boss, brimming with placations.

Fascinated, horrified, Jane slumped in her swivel chair. There were too many details—the flickering bulb overhead, keyboards clicking, and the familiar feel of her cubicle—for this to be a dream. The date on her computer clock confirmed that this was winter two years earlier.

Her husband hadn't walked out on her yet. Her hands tightened around each other.

"Hey! Jane!"

Jane swiveled her chair to face Ryan, the young man who worked across from her, hoping her face wasn't too flushed. Only his head was poked into her cubicle. He looked different—of course, this was before he had shaved his sideburns and cut his hair.

"I liked how you handled Moore," he said. "He blames everyone for his mistakes, but I think you caught him off-guard."

"Oh. Um…I…Thanks!"

Jane spent the rest of the workday humming off and on as she read news articles on the internet, unable to concentrate on data she barely remembered processing. She checked under her desk every so often to make sure the black bottle was still there. Upon leaving the office, she was delayed by coworkers who wanted to hear what she'd said to Moore.

Her good mood drained as she entered the subway. Stops were called out on the muffled speaker system, but the commute was rote to her, and she could not think of anything except her husband. Jim had treated her like a child. She had acted like one sometimes, letting him power trip so that she would not have to face a life alone. And now he must be waiting for her—along with a pile of dirty dishes in the sink and laundry spilling out of the hamper. He would tell her to cook dinner as soon as she walked in the door. How could she face that again, knowing what would come later?

The subway train jerked to a stop. Jane joined the throng streaming out of the open doors, her stomach churning. There would be a bitter, furious, and perhaps violent fight when she kicked Jim out.

But she still had the bottle.

It was a comforting weight in her satchel. When the last passengers were out of sight, she sat on a concrete bench near a streetlamp and pulled it out. The unmarked surface glistened in the yellowish light.

If it worked the same magic…

She had nothing good ahead of her. Moore would make every effort to get her fired—again—and she could not tolerate Jim. She shuddered at the idea of reliving two years worth of dreary days and lonely nights. But if one small mouthful from the time bottle had sent her back two years, perhaps she could return to a time when she had truly been happy.

The cap of the bottle popped off as easily as before. Jane tipped back her head and closed her lips around the bottle's neck.

Gulp.

The world shifted. She felt herself wearing different clothes. She opened her eyes and saw Jim the way he'd been soon after their marriage. It was 1996; maybe 1995.

Gulp.

This was her temp agency job, the first one she had managed out of college. Things were already going downhill in her life. But this was youth, and it was exhilarating. She felt sexy. She wanted more of it.

Gulp.

August 10, 1981

A part of Jane was aware that she should feel exhausted after such a long day. Instead, she felt invigorated, ready to run a marathon and spend a day kicking balls at the beach.

All of the little discomforts she had grown accustomed to over the years were completely gone. She felt no lower back pain, although she sat in a cramped posture. There were no fillings

in her teeth, no crowns. She felt limber and light. Of course, she weighed one hundred and twenty-five pounds at this age. She was tall, slim, with her long legs drawn against the car seat in front of her. A duffel bag sat beneath her feet. She remembered this rust-bucket Olds, and its teenage driver.

"Dave?" she asked incredulously.

Her voice was as startling as the rest of it. She sounded young.

"What?" asked Dave in an amused voice, not turning around. A girl sat in the front next to him—Sharon—while the back was filled with beach gear, Jane, and a teenage boy whose name she could not remember.

"Nothing," she said faintly.

Dave had died in a car accident. He had become a victim of drunk driving the summer after their high school graduation. Not this summer. The next one? Goose bumps broke out across Jane's skin. This was like living a movie where she knew the plot. Worse; it was like talking to a ghost. She wanted to see Dave's face, but how could she look him in the eye, knowing when and where his life would end? Was there any way to change that future? Would he believe her?

"Whoa." The backseat boy brushed his hand over Jane's thighs, which were mostly bare. "Major goose bumps. Are you cold?"

"A little." She forced a smile. He was too young for her. Just a kid. But his face was familiar because she had dated him for a week or two, though the details were gone. Had he bought her ice cream on the boardwalk? Would that happen today?

Jane felt tears threaten, unexpectedly. She had hijacked her own life. What had happened to the real Jane; the original? Was she erased from existence? Was she changing her own memories?

The thought came to her that she would flunk all the tests she couldn't remember studying for, and she nearly burst into maniacal laughter. The greenery outside probably meant it was summer vacation. She had no idea what month it was, or year.

The traffic clued her in. The majority of cars on the highway were boxy and wide. A boxy bus drove past on the westbound side. The sky was a shade of blue she had nearly forgotten, so deep it was almost indigo. Her teenage friends had shaggy hair and wore shirts with wide stripes.

"Hey!" Her nameless boyfriend leaned forward suddenly. "Where'd you get a wine bottle?"

Jane felt adrenalin flood her veins. The bottle was still clutched in her right hand. It was a bit lighter. She had drunk perhaps a fourth of the contents.

"Wine?" Sharon twisted around to look at them; so young, innocent, and beautiful at this age, though she wore too much make-up. "Jane doesn't drink. We'd have noticed." She saw the bottle and broke into bright laughter. "Awesome!"

Jane could remember how devastated Sharon had been—would be—when Dave died. After college, years later, she had married a man in California, but beyond that…Jane wished she had taken the time to find out. And then cancelled that wish. The more she knew, the less she wanted to be here.

"How much of that stuff did you drink?" asked the backseat boy.

"Can I have some?" teased Sharon.

"I'm going to have to beg off," said Dave as he slowed down for a stoplight. "I'm the designated driver."

Jane wasn't ready to deal with this situation. Aiming a shaky smile at her boyfriend, and

another one at Sharon, she lifted the bottle toward her lips.

She needed more time. Just a taste.

August 4, 1981

It was dark, but the shapes around her were achingly familiar. Jane was in her childhood bedroom. The glowing readout of her nightstand clock showed 3:37AM.

She capped the bottle and stuffed it underneath her bed. How far back in time had a lick around the bottleneck brought her?

For long minutes, she stared at the curtains of her window, lit by the glow of the corner streetlight. Her father was snoring in the next room. He had died from a heart attack.

As dawn was brightening the sky, Jane found her favorite nightgown, dressed for bed, crawled under the blankets, and slept for three hours.

Breakfast was a macabre affair. Her parents were young and healthy, and they insisted that Jane finish her orange juice and scrambled eggs then run, or she would be late to work. Jane stared blankly until she realized that this must be the summer where she had picked up some extra bucks working the counter at a doughnut shop. She was shocked by how easily she fell into old routines. It was as if the decades ahead were being erased. She supposed they were.

Déjà vu hit her strongly on the way out the door. Her father was watching the news in the living room. A killer had escaped from a mental hospital, there was rioting in Belfast, and an emergency OPEC meeting had been announced. She had lived through all of this. She knew what would come next: A car horn would honk, and it would be Allan, carpooling with her to work.

"Honey, would you mind closing the blinds on your way out?" asked her father.

The car horn honked outside.

"Sure," she said through numb lips. She flipped the blinds closed…and paused.

The winning lottery numbers were being announced on TV.

She memorized them: 25, 34, 13, 9, 21, and 3. If she'd had anything handy to write with, she would have written them down. The jackpot was seventy-five million.

August 3, 1981

Jane had hoped she would not have to resort to using "I have a lucky feeling" but, at age seventeen, she was too young to buy a ticket. Her mother refused to play the lottery.

"Please?" she begged. "I'll never ask you for another favor again."

Her mother put down the mug of coffee that Jane had prepared for her, and peered at her wryly. They sat in a quiet corner of the doughnut shop.

"You've been acting strange for five days, honey." Her mother took another sip. "You run off to work in a good mood, and then after work, instead of going over to Sharon's or catching a movie with someone, you want to hang out with your mother. What happened to the old Jane?"

Jane laughed appropriately. The past five days had been torture. It was a small miracle she hadn't been fired; she couldn't remember the nuances of the cash register. At first, she hadn't recalled the name of her boss. A dozen rumors had started about Jane having short term memory loss. If her mother refused to buy this lottery ticket, then she might have to suffer through years of repetition; she could only go forward through time in the ordinary manner. There was no way to avoid that in any case, really—but seventy-five million dollars would make

it much more tolerable.

"All right, I'll buy a ticket." Her mother blotted her mouth and put the crumpled napkin aside. "If you'll never ask another favor again." Her tone made it obvious how far she believed that claim. "But this is silly."

Jane nearly skipped through the parking lot to her mother's station wagon.

June 1, 2034

Jane enjoyed her very rich life.

June 2, 2034

On the night after her seventieth birthday, Jane tossed and turned on her king-sized foam bed, unable to sleep, despite her husband's familiar rhythmic snoring. Martin had married her because of her wealth. She had no doubt about that, although his handsome face and chiseled body had blinded her during the early years of their marriage. Now she wondered if she had made a mistake. Perhaps she should have accepted the invitation of the man in the Cambridge bookstore who had seemed so interested in her, way back in 1999.

She stood, clutching her bathrobe around herself, and quietly slipped out of the bedroom.

Her mansion was an elegant affair, with a glass wall overlooking a lush mountain valley that was also her property. Jane had supplemented her share of the lottery payout by managing her investments wisely—with help from the bottle, of course. She didn't mind reliving a week when it brought her an extra hundred million dollars of income. A single lick around the bottle's rim could do that. The news media had dubbed her "Lucky Jane," or "Money Jane." Those terms were spreading into common household usage.

Not even Martin had access to the vault where she kept the bottle. It was hidden in her seldom-used study, a windowless room on the fourth floor. She moved a decorative table aside, straining her withered old arms. The steel vault door was hidden by wallpaper. The electronic password resided only in her memory.

During the past decade, she had thought about the bottle countless times. Humankind had not yet invented a way to postpone natural death. She might die at any time, and there would be no more chances after that. Youth would be a balm. She had already lived a tremendously long life when the original forty years were taken into account, but what if she could double it?

There was enough elixir left in the bottle. She could return to the twentieth century and live her happy, fulfilling life all over again. What if she didn't marry Martin this time? She loved him, but there had been fights, and they certainly kept secrets from each other. She could go back and…

She didn't like the idea of losing Martin permanently. Not like this. They had built up a store of happy memories together, and if she returned to childhood, only she would remember them. To Martin, it would be as though Jane had never existed. Besides, she had already used the bottle for what it seemed to be meant for.

Perhaps.

What if she was meant to use the elixir to promote world peace? She could predict major events, and people could worship her as a child prophet. Or maybe she was supposed to achieve some sort of enlightenment. She had made mistakes even this time around. She had treated her

father poorly before his death, and she hadn't spent enough time with her mother. She hadn't given enough to charity. Her friends were few and distant. And she'd made a fool of herself at that party in Beverly Hills twenty years ago. She still regretted that.

On the verge of touching the uncapped bottle to her wrinkled lips, Jane pulled it away and read the placard again. *There Is No Return.*

A few gulps would erase her history. Martin would lead an entirely different life, devoid of Lucky Jane. Would she still feel lucky if she had to cheat her way through lotteries, casinos, and Wall Street all over again?

In the end, the simple truth was that she did not want to shrivel up and die.

Gulp.
Gulp.
Gulp.
Gulp.
Gulp.
Gulp.
Gulp.

May 12, 1984

Jane knew it was a mistake right away. She sat in her Berkeley dorm room with a textbook open on her lap, realizing that she would have to take exams without the benefit of having the knowledge fresh in her mind. She could correct all the little wrongs she had done, but in between, there would be long months and years of repetition, filled with worldwide and personal disasters which she knew were coming. Her parents and friends would die again.

Little changes were what mattered. She would make little adjustments, and she would hide the bottle until it was needed again.

"Okay," she said, and she set about studying for an exam that she had passed fifty years ago.

November 16, 2019

Jane made it as far as fifty-five before she began to fear for her sanity. Life was not nearly as enjoyable as it had been the previous time around.

Every fresh decision seemed to end with disappointment. Her memory was losing its sharpness. She had experienced a total of one hundred and twenty-eight years of life, and her outlook was accordingly jaded. She rejected Martin after a few dates with him, plagued by the fear of repeating the worst moments of their marriage, but she was unable to cultivate another romance, afraid of anything that might eventually give her reason to drink from the bottle.

Death was creeping up on her. That was something she could not change. One morning, Jane woke and understood that she must reverse something major, or she would die as a duller version of herself.

It was time to hit the bottle.

January 5, 1979

The remaining contents of the bottle swished near the bottom. Jane stuffed it into the

school desk in front of her before the teacher could see. Too late! If they took away the bottle… she grabbed it and drank a tiny mouthful as fast as possible.

December 12, 1977

As the taste faded, Jane stood in front of her bedroom mirror and saw a thirteen-year-old girl gazing back with ancient eyes. A couple of years made a big difference at this developmental age; she hadn't had time to consider that.

She would make the best of it. People would hail her as a child genius. It wouldn't be so bad, reliving high school.

March 17, 1978

School was awful. Her parents were monstrous. She had already grown up twice, graduated from two universities, experienced two marriages and countless relationships, mingled with celebrities and politicians, and managed a vast estate. The 1980's felt like ancient history. The Cold War made her sneer.

She had been skipped ahead a grade, but she was unable to make new friends in the eighth grade class. The friends she remembered having wanted nothing to do with her. Kids defined her as "creepy" or "weird." Her predictions about the future were part of it, but mostly, she had gained a reputation for brooding and depression.

She sat cross-legged on her bed, listening to Black Sabbath on her tape deck, drinking root beer and yearning for internet access that wouldn't be available for years. Suicide had crossed her mind more than once since her last drink from the time bottle. She ached to see Martin; to see him the way she remembered him best, and to have him recognize her and love her.

She didn't think she could take another year of living like this.

Her eyes fell on the dusty backpack stuffed into a corner of her closet. Recently, it hadn't required much effort to avoid the bottle, despite the mess her life had become. An occasional lick had allowed her to fix particularly bad stretches. Even the fixes were excruciating to go through, and sometimes she didn't bother.

When she closed her eyes, she saw a mausoleum with her name engraved across the top: JANE TEMPEST 1964-2064 "LUCKY JANE." That was what the world should have remembered. Now she would be known as Lonely, Bitter Jane.

There were still changes she could make. Adjustments. Jane hoped there was enough of the elixir left. She licked her lips.

Root beer leaked into her carpet, unnoticed, as she dropped the can and crossed to her closet.

April 9, 1970

Her body felt uncomfortably small and energetic. She was sitting on a playground swing. It didn't matter; it would all be erased. Erased, erased, eradicated! *Tabula rasa!*

Little Jane tipped her head all the way back and poured the last of the elixir into her mouth.

June 4, 1964

Arthur rearranged the blankets, doing everything he could to make sure his wife was comfortable in their bed with their infant son.

"Little Johnnie," murmured Karen. She brushed the baby's cheek with her finger. "He already looks like you."

The nurses had said as much. One of them had been surprised that the baby was a boy, claiming that the signs indicated a girl, but Karen and Arthur had been prepared. It was a simple matter to change the planned name from Jane to John.

"We should get rid of that souvenir." Karen gestured to the black bottle sitting atop their dresser. It had appeared mysteriously on the night of the baby's conception.

Chuckling to himself, Arthur picked up the empty bottle. Something rattled softly inside. Exchanging glances with his wife, he upended the bottle, holding out his palm. A slip of paper fell out.

The Future Is Blank.

All Mistakes Have Been Erased.

Marveling over the message, Arthur Tempest dropped the bottle into the bathroom trashcan. He kept the slip of paper for his son.

The End

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she asked.

I played it cool. "Maybe."

"Gamboolaboola is one of the galaxy's most famous seats of learning," she cooed. "The classic elegance of Tau Ceti IV's balmy southern continent, the endless blue beaches and rolling red surf, the thrilling carnage of the Megapod races, the polyphonic humming of glittermites under the twin moons…. you get the idea. Also, Gamboolaboola does have a staggeringly high academic reputation."

I signed my indenture papers.

"Indenture?" she said, "That's just a form of words, nothing to worry about! Wait here. I'll pop out and arrange your travel orders."

My travel orders arrived five minutes later. Two hefty blokes in Commonwealth security uniforms accompanied them. They were equipped with people-prods, mace-o-blasters and beetling brows.

"Underpants?" hefty bloke number one grunted in my general direction.

I edged away. "No, my name is Underwood. Raymond Underwood. This is obviously a case of mistaken identity."

Hefty bloke number two peered at his wrist-fax. I took the opportunity to edge further away. He raised his people-prod.

The floor rocketed up to meet me and proceeded to fling me around the room. Consciousness fled happily.

* * *

I woke to the standard nightmare. Mrs. Witton, my first-year senior school math teacher, was fixing me with her bloodshot eye. I was sure that she'd just asked me a really tough question. As usual, I had no idea what the answer was. I had other issues: I was naked and strapped to an examining table.

"Are you awake, sweet pea?" she asked with a smirk.

"No. Why have you only got one eye?"

She made a face (literally) by shaking her head violently from side-to-side. Waves of pixelation swept through her body. A jagged forest of cubes burst through her face, then rapidly fractionated into smaller and smaller cubes. When it subsided, she had two eyes—both bloodshot.

"Is that better, pumpkin?" she asked.

"Not really, it suggests I'm awake. You're a fractal-bot, aren't you? Why are you imaging my least favorite teacher ever? And while you're at it, call the police. I've been abducted!"

"No, you haven't."

"Have so!"

"You signed your indenture papers. We own you, bucko."

"Bucko? What next? Cool? Bippin'? Oh, forget it. Call the police. I've been abducted by two apes and taken to an evil research lab. Help!"

"Stop shouting, Dumbo."

"I'm not shouting. I'm screaming for help. Help!"

She loomed over me. Both her eyes were still bloodshot, but one of them had green blood swilling around. It didn't help.

"Listen, kiddo. You've not been abducted. You signed up for Gamboolaboola University's

distance learning program. This is the start of your induction. I gave you the 'Exam Anxiety' injection while you were snoozing. The Tau Cetians like to get all that icky Freudian nonsense out of human students' systems as soon as possible."

"That's why you're here?"

"Of course, snuggles. My pop-quizzes still rank as your most anxiety-inducing-educational terror factor. Bearing in mind how many terror factors you have, I'm quite proud of that."

"You're a computer and your empathy routines are on the fritz, snuggles. Hey, just a minute, I signed up for a scholarship at Gambo-thingie U, not some crappy distance learning program. It's all coming back to me now. I want a lawyer!"

She glowered. I hastily backtracked.

"Well, no, actually I don't. Obviously."

She smiled wickedly. "A scholarship? Well, I think you need to learn to read the small print. You signed up to Gamboolaboola University's distance-learning diploma in Cross-species Public Health Management."

"Distance learning?"

"Tau Ceti is eleven and a half light years away, how more distant do you want it to be?"

"Cross-species public health?"

"A growing field of study."

"I'll bet. What's that whirring noise?"

"The learning plan delivery system. Try not to move, it might miss the artery."

I couldn't move my limbs, but I could scream.

Lot of good it did.

Mrs. Witton kept up a running commentary on what was happening to me. I'd been juiced with general memory-boosters, which explains why, despite my terrified howling, I can remember every appalling moment. They didn't bother with chalk-and-talk, you see, or even subliminal memory reinforcement. No, they went straight for the old hippocampus. With a bloody big needle full of polymorphing-synaptotagmin, which is, apparently, very slick at laying down ordered memory pathways. Just do a hi-res OMRI on someone who actually knows something about the subject (while they are thinking real hard about it). Run the data through an expert system fuzzy-logic comparison to get rid of extraneous memories, download it into a protein synthesizer, and then squirt it into the lucky recipient.

Hey, Gizmo, instant learning.

I found later that the extraneous memory eradication doesn't always go one hundred percent. Something to do with the amygdala, whatever that is. But more of that later. Back to the needle. It must have been at least twenty centimeters long, and could have been used to lance a megapod's corns. To add to its charms, it was stuck on the end of a four meter-long, articulated metal arm.

"It's time for your medicine, pumpernickel."

If I could have moved, and if she'd been corporeal, I'd have strangled her.

Then the needle began to move down my body. I watched, horrified, as it moved past my chest, past my belly button . . . it stopped just where the (enhanced) standard nightmare said it would. Mrs. Witton said something about the femoral artery being just dandy for such a high-volume injection. The technicalities escaped me. I was desperately trying to remember the little-known prayer for flaccidity.

* * *

When I woke up, I thought I was on one of the offshore prison hulks that are so popular with law enforcement agencies since the Commonwealth simplified our legal systems. Everything was gray: the walls and floors, the ceiling, the lumpy bunk I was laying on, the ill-fitting one-piece coverall I was wearing.

"I'm innocent!" I wailed.

"He's awake," someone said.

I jerked upright, banging my head on the gray metal pipe work of the bunk above.

"Hey!" someone grunted.

"Sorry," I muttered.

A woman and a couple of blokes walked up. She was carrying a clipboard, which she stared at quizzically.

"Underpants?" she asked.

"Underwood. Ray Underwood."

"That makes more sense. Welcome to the Commonwealth ship *Amiable Disposition*, and your new career in public health inspection. I'm Mary Winston; these characters behind me are Fred Brinks and Pierre Leroy. That thing snoring on your upper bunk is Lucille Carter."

"I heard that," the thing grunted.

"Whoo, she's awake. You are honored," one of the guys said. Leroy, I think. Hard to say. With shaved heads, gray clothes and pasty complexions, they all looked alike. They even had identical button-like earrings. I ran my hand over my head.

"Sub-cutaneous depilation, lasts a year at least, and that's a full-body job in case you were wondering," Leroy said.

This explained the itching.

I knew it was Leroy; he had a little nametag on his chest. I read mine. It said 'Underpants, R'.

"C'mon," Mary said, "you should get something to eat. We're under drive soon. Once we hit Go-mode, you won't feel much like eating."

"This is a Go-ship?!" I said, awed by the prospect of hyper-light speed travel.

"Imagine the possibilities," I said over a chorus of groans. "We might see the ancient planet factories cunningly hidden in the Eagle nebula, visit Tranai the Beautiful, or even catch a glimpse of the fabled, and probably mythical, V'kren Empire."

Breathless with excitement, I proudly told my new friends that I was the first member of my family to ply the infinite space lanes.

"And the last," Lucille muttered from her hideout.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"The armpit of the universe," Leroy said.

"I'm hungry." Lucille muttered as she slid off her bunk.

I peered round her ample bottom as it passed a centimeter or so in front of my face. She was quite small but very generously proportioned. Mary, by contrast, was slim and scarily fit. I sucked my modest tum in a shade and made a resolution to spend more time in the gym.

"C'mon, tubby," Leroy said.

We walked in silence along deserted, gray, metal-walled corridors. There were no windows, just bulkhead-style doors, most of which had 'NO ENTRY' printed on them in large, red letters. The canteen turned out to be 'CARGO MESS 4'.

The mess was more festive than the other parts of the ship I'd seen so far. There was a

faded yellow smiley face stuck on the wall near the serving hatch. Leroy did the honors, handing me a plate with rice and something orange-colored. It tasted as odd as it looked, and the warm, carbonated black liquid I washed it down with wasn't much better. Leroy and the two women sat at the same end of the long metal table. Brinks sat at the other end. No one seemed to mind. I guess he was a loner.

"Food taste okay?" Mary asked.

"A bit odd actually, sort of like aniseed."

"And why would that be?"

"I guess that'd be some sort of anethole derivative. Are we maybe transporting a shipment of Thandoran musk flakes? Under shipboard conditions they have been known to volatilize fairly high molar mass fragrance components…"

The others were smirking.

"What the hell's going on? I don't know any of this stuff!" I said.

"Oh, yes you do," Mary said. "Any suggestions for dealing with the problem?"

"I suggest that we seal the cargo in a molecular filter wrap, a fairly wide mesh will do it, say ten Angstro- bugger!"

"It's your conditioning kicking in, rookie," Leroy said. "Don't worry, the weirdness passes with time."

"No, it doesn't," Lucille muttered between wolfing mouthfuls of orange stuff.

"Ignore her," Leroy said.

Lucille stuck her orange-colored tongue out and continued eating. Mildly disgusted, I picked at my meal. The aniseed flavor was fading, but there was still something slightly odd about the taste.

Chlorophenols? Chloroanisoles?

Then I knew. A thousand off-flavors rained through my head, each neatly described, complete with bullet points, rotten onion notes in blanched *ping fritters*, prawn-like overtones in *burba-beefette medallions*, yeasty fermented notes in *Changan hair soup* (made with real hair!)—

Someone slapped me.

"Ow!"

"Sorry, you were in information overload, try shallow breathing for a while," Mary said.

"Will that help?" I asked as a fearsome-looking molecule swam into my mind's eye. It bristled with coiling alkyl chains and spiky amino groups and was obviously up to no good.

"It'll reduce the amount of oxygen getting to your brain, which is always a good thing," Lucille said.

"What will?" I said.

"See, it's working already," Lucille said.

I pushed my food away. The plate skittered across the table and bumped against Lucille's. She speared an orange lump from it.

"Can someone explain what the hell is going on? I was just—"

"Seventeen minutes," Lucille said gleefully. "I win."

Leroy pulled a piece of paper out of his breast pocket, scrunched it up and threw it over his shoulder.

"Merde," he muttered.

"We had a pool on whose memories you got," Mary said. "Looks like McNab's. Most of the other candidates would have had you demanding answers as soon as they woke up."

"McNab?"

"Theodore McNab," Mary said. "Australian professor of alien bugology, twice a Nobel runner-up, usually has a relaxed—"

"I'm sure this is fascinating," I said, exasperated. "But will someone please explain what's going on?"

"—if occasionally snappy, disposition."

"He's still pissed at the Nobel Committee. Are you finished with your drink?" Lucille asked.

There was a clatter of metal on metal. Brinks left the mess. This was the first time I'd really looked at him. The man was positively haggard.

"Did he get McNab?" I whispered.

They all fell about laughing.

Leroy leered from across the table. "He's a communications specialist."

"Doesn't seem very communicative to me."

"It's just his way," Mary said.

They obviously didn't want to let me in on whatever the big secret was, so I changed tack. "Okay. Hey, what about me getting some of McNab's emotions and stuff? I thought we only got the relevant memories."

They all fell about again. Teary-eyed, they finally told me the sorry story of my recent and future life. The Commonwealth was on the look out for "bright, young" humans. That much was true. The brightest and the best really could look forward to a Galaxy-class education, and an astonishingly exciting future. Unfortunately, the number of humans who fall into that category is small, lost in the statistical noise small. But, as everyone knows, the Commonwealth is committed to opening the galaxy up to less fortunate (or in our case, feckless) species.

"And you," Mary said, "are the living proof that jobs are available throughout the galaxy for humans—even if only as public health inspectors."

I knew about PHI's. The news was full of food scares: wallaby entrails in the tofu burgers, or bovine growth hormone in *Scrummy Crunchy Choco Flakes* ("Watch your kids grow like crazy!" the adverts said, without specifying how the extra growth was produced or how much craziness accompanied it). There was always something. And the Public Health Inspectors would be there like white-coated old-West lawmen, clearing up the mess with their shiny flame-throwers, and reassuring the panicked population.

It didn't sound like too bad a job to me.

My chums told me about the downside. Public heath control is an icky enough job when you're just dealing with a single planet. But when you bring several, separately evolved biospheres together you massively increase the potential for 'interaction'. Mary gleefully told the tale of a charmless, snaggle-toothed, intestinal parasite that, although harmless to its Thandooian host, liked nothing better than burrowing deep in the throat wattles of maleoid Ubts. This produced disgusting (the McNab in me obliged with a vivid mental image) multicolored warts that femaloid Ubts found off-putting, romance-wise. And there was nothing more aggressive than a maleoid Ubt who'd been deprived of his several-times daily oats. It was part of our job to go in with the tranquilizer guns, and then use long pointy tweezers to dig the parasites out.

I was feeling quite ill by this time. I shared my feelings with my colleagues. They didn't even offer to help me mop up.

* * *

Chewing on a space-sickness pill, I announced that I was going to explore the ship.

"See you in five minutes," Lucille said.

"Don't be silly," I said.

I'd grown up watching footage of the Commonwealth's Go-ships. They were massive things, all designed along a similar plan with a lozenge-shaped crew section at the front. Behind that were the concentric rings of the Go-drive and the clustered cylinders for crew and cargo. A half-kilometer away, at the end of a thin, silver-colored cable, lay the fusion drive that pulled the ship out of a star's gravity well, up to the point where the Go-drive could be lit.

There was bound to be plenty to explore.

It turned out that we were restricted to our own little section, consisting of a bunkroom, mess, showers, and heads. There were doors, presumably leading to more exciting parts of the ship, but they were locked and all of them had the words 'NO ENTRY. CREW ONLY. LETHAL FORCE WILL BE USED' stenciled on them. It didn't quite take five minutes to cover the ground, so I dawdled a while before slinking back into the bunkroom.

"Get lost did you?" Lucille asked.

"Why can't we get to the rest of the ship?" I said.

"Restricted," Leroy said. "We're just cargo. Get used to the idea."

"Makes you happier about life," Lucille said.

"I wasn't unhappy," I said. They all groaned.

TWO MINUTES TO GO DRIVE

"What the hell was that?" I gasped. A large bell had taken up residence between my ears. My sight was blurred, but I could see my crewmates adjusting their ear-rings. I pointed dumbly at them.

"Oh, sorry, forgot to tell you about the white noise ear defenders," someone far away said.

"What?"

"Lie down!"

I lay down as the Go-drive lit. The universe screamed and plunged into a sensory blind spot. Suddenly, I wasn't frightened. I didn't exist, so what was there to be frightened about? We slipped through the quantum interstices of the universe and headed for… somewhere. I didn't know or care. When you (and the universe, for that matter) don't exist, one non-place is as good as another non-place. If happiness is the absence of things to worry about, the Go-drive was its guided tour.

I felt obscurely disappointed when we emerged a hundred light years later.

* * *

The Commonwealth has ninety-six official languages, and there are several thousand lesser ones in regular use. (Anglish is somewhere in the low thirty-seven hundreds.) This makes for complicated, and large, signposts. The one in the airlock was bit like an eye chart for the terminally abstract. Starting at the top were several thick lines of flamboyant scribbles, and then followed by a couple of apparently blank lines ("Not everyone uses the same visible spectrum, you wavelength-ist pig," was Lucille's reply to my polite question). A forest of suspiciously random dots followed, and next, what looked like a dyslexic elephant's idea of joined up writing.

The airlock speakers muttered briefly, but the door remained stubbornly closed. I continued my scrutiny of the sign. The nearer I got to the bottom of it, the smaller the writing

became. I leaned closer, and there, right at the foot, in tiny letters: *'Welcome to Halcyon Drift mining station. Please ambulate on the right. Do not litter.'*

"Hey, it's in Anglish," I said.

Leroy muttered something in French, or some other language that the Commonwealth had decided was too archaic to be used in interstellar circles.

The airlock opened. Several pieces of litter were sucked in. I gingerly kicked a wrapper that contained something green that smelled of meat.

"So much for the littering law," I said, huffily.

Leroy burst out laughing.

"Am I missing something?" I said.

"It means we're not allowed to have children," Mary said.

"Not a problem in his case," Lucille muttered.

I ignored her. I was too busy being happy to say anything snide. I was on a space station orbiting an immense gas giant, somewhere in the far reaches of the galaxy!

Ahead of me was a wide, curving corridor. I'd seen media of Commonwealth stations, and judging by the little I could see, this one was a monster, probably a couple of hundred meters in diameter. I stepped out of the airlock and bounced towards the ceiling.

"Whoa," I said.

"Oh-point-six gee," Mary said as she steadied me with a hand on my arm. "Running off isn't the best idea, at least until you're acclimatized."

Lucille pushed past me, and bounced away at an impressive rate of knots. She was moving like a small dirigible caught in a supersonic zephyr by the time she disappeared around the curve of the station.

I stepped tentatively through the piles of litter toward the nearest window, keen to see if the giant planet was in view, and wondering if I'd be able to catch a glimpse of good old Sol. I was out of luck. The window was filthy. A faint orange blur was just visible; I assumed it was the planet.

"We just got here in time," Mary said.

She took a spatula out of her tool kit and scraped a thin line of goo off the window, sniffed it, and then waved in my direction. I took a suspicious sniff; it smelled like a mixture of creosote and bananas. Dominoes fell in my head. Corrosive phosphorous compounds were leaking into the station's air conditioning, and reacting with the polysaccharide-based window seals.

"Hey, I actually know what's happened here! It's the Rapsilan-lo!" I said, edging away from the windows.

"Fantastique," Leroy said, "and you know what you're going to have to do to sort this mess out?"

"Yes . . . oh."

"There's something to be said for ignorance," Mary said wistfully. "But don't quote me."

Nausea welled up again. I looked frantically for somewhere to be sick. Just along the corridor there was a large brown pottery urn. I staggered towards it but only managed a couple of bouncy steps before Leroy grabbed hold of me.

"You damn fool, no!" he shouted, pushing me against a wall.

"Ineegtobe," I muttered through hands clasped tight over my mouth.

I heard a hiss and a blissful coolness spread through me. Mary was holding a hypo-spray. The nausea went in a flash. I couldn't help wondering why she'd not resorted to it back on the Go-ship.

"Damn English, you want to start an interstellar war?" Leroy said.

"Not especially. What are you on about?"

Leroy pointed surreptitiously at the urn. I stood on tiptoes, leaned over, and looked inside. Up close it still looked like an unremarkable brown urn.

"What is it?" I asked.

Mary and Leroy frog-marched me away from the pot.

"It's a Jalfizzle," Mary hissed.

"A what?"

"A Jalfizzle," she said. "Silicon-based life-form, and one of the most warlike species in the Galaxy."

"It doesn't look very warlike," I said. "More like an under-designed plant pot."

"Appearances can be deceptive. After first contact, it took the Commonwealth a hundred and fifty standard years to integrate them," Mary said.

I was impressed. It took the Commonwealth less than an Earth week to conquer (sorry, integrate) Earth. We fought hard, of course, not guessing how appallingly outgunned we were. Then we surrendered. The image of the Commonwealth's representatives standing in front of the smoldering ruins of that iconic white building, and uttering the famous 'Bring your lawyers to us!' demand, is burned into every human's memory. Even if it was only worth the equivalent of a column nanometer on page ninety-six of the Sunday Galactic Times, it was a defining moment for the people of Earth. To be fair to the Commonwealth (always a good plan), they did rebuild the Taj Mahal, and to twice its original size.

Mary and Leroy let go of me. Our sprint around the station had brought us to a large door painted with another menagerie of alien notices. It irised open and revealed an incredible sight.

"Bugger," I said, understandably.

"Pah," Leroy said.

"Can you see it?" Mary asked.

"Not yet," Leroy said.

I had no idea what they were talking about. I didn't care. We were standing on a balcony that poked into an immense open space. It took me a few moments to realize that that endless orange and green cliff opposite us was a gas giant. Gargantuan cloud formations painted the sky in all directions, their supersonic hustle and bustle frozen by distance and immensity.

There didn't seem to be any windows.

"We're—" I croaked.

"Looking through a force shell nearly two kilometers in diameter," Mary explained. "The physical structure of the station is wrapped around the shell in a series of interlocking rings. If you're interested, the helium-3 collectors are over there."

She waved toward a forest of black rectangles hanging innocuously in space between the giant planet and the station.

"How big?" I croaked.

"Continent-sized, Australia anyway," Mary said.

"I didn't know they could do that," I said. "I guess this is one of the Commonwealth's bigger stations."

"No, a little under medium-size," Mary said. "Look, there it is, come on."

I tried not to look down as we traversed a bewildering series of snaking walkways and stairs that led to tiers of little platforms, most of which were teeming with aliens. It didn't help that the direction of gravity proved to be a local phenomenon. Aliens were standing on tiers

flipped at all kinds of distressing angles, from the merely unpleasantly sloping, to the out-and-out upside down.

Dozens of elegantly coiled Ngus wafted around, intent on their incomprehensible business. Groups of spiny-backed Thandooians clustered around huge, twisted, wicker-like columns. Flashes of movement caught my eye, hints of streaming color among the contortions. When I tried to get a close look, Leroy pulled me back.

"We have business," he said.

I spotted a triad of the fairly humanoid Brantfoat. No, I corrected myself, there were two Brantfoat, arm in arm with Lucille. They seemed very friendly. Unasked, McNab supplied me with an estimate of Brantfoat-human recreational compatibility. Shuddering, I turned my attention back to my feet. The floor was gone. I could feel it; I knew it was there. I just couldn't see it. Grimly, I looked straight ahead. Interspersed with the network of stairs and platforms, a network of twisting tubes led to blisters filled with pale brown foggy vapor.

"There's the boss," Mary said, pointing somewhere below.

"This is exciting," I said, putting my multi-dimensional vertigo aside. The tubes must be for the fabled non-oxygen breathing species that were rumored to populate the inner reaches of the galaxy.

"McNab," Leroy said.

"He can't help it," Mary said, bless her. "First time in the big city."

"Is he going to be sick again?"

"No, I'm not, and I'm standing right here!"

"Hush, here's the boss" Mary said.

The boss turned out to be a Ngus. It was beautiful, six meters of tightly-coiled, multi-colored candy floss. Flecks of color raced across its surface and burrowed like trains of fireflies inside it. I could hear a faint, exquisite trilling as it flexed elegantly. Even before the Commonwealth's crash course in alien physiology, I knew about the Ngus. They were famous as the only plants to achieve sentience. When news of their existence reached Earth, dozens of leading human molecular biologists committed suicide.

One other thing everyone knows about Ngus is that the language is impossible to understand, which seemed like a bit of a problem.

"Hey, Mary, how do we—"

She nodded at Brinks. (Remember Brinks?) I couldn't recall him saying a word since I'd woken up on the good old *Amiable Disposition*. Now he was standing on one leg, waving his arms around, and wiggling his ears, really wiggling, like they'd been working out. He switched legs for a moment, and then started jumping up and down while patting his head and rubbing his stomach.

"This the cabaret?" I asked.

"He's a translator," Mary whispered.

"What from? The zoinked-up bonkers?"

"Brink's movements are the human dialect of pidgin Galactic standard."

"Someone's taking the Micky," I suggested.

"That's entirely possible," she conceded with a smile that quite took my mind off Brink's increasingly frenzied St. Vitus's pogo.

"He's conditioned to let him read the Ngus dialect," she said. "That's the changes of coil topography the Ngus is making. Of course, the Ngus is using a simplified version—"

The Ngus slithered away, leaving a beautiful, but too-rapidly fading tremolo hum behind.

Brinks collapsed to the floor and lay there twitching. Mary knelt down, and jabbed him with her trusty hypo. She leaned over, listening intently to his croaking whispers. Then she stood up and gestured for Leroy and me to pick up Brinks. The poor guy's eyes were glazed, he was saturated in sweat, and he was muttering something about aardwolf stew, or it might have been Andrew's nephew.

Carrying the incoherent Brinks, Leroy and I followed Mary. She seemed to know where she was going, which was just as well because I was immediately, hopelessly lost. Leroy looked around confidently, and practiced curling his top lip, but he didn't fool me. He was as lost as I was. I decided not to worry. There was plenty to gawk at. We took a hair-raising plunge down a drop-shaft that paralleled the path of a hundred meter-wide transparent conduit that, Mary told me, opened directly onto space. Suddenly, a Domble-Domble colony swept along the tube. It was gorgeous, much more so in real-life than the vids. Bright green lobes twirled fluently around their common center. Then it was gone, wafted away by a sudden pulse of its gravity organ.

"Lovely," I said, as its ebbing tide tugged gently at me. No one disagreed.

Eventually, we entered a capsule that took us across the station axis and opened onto a dingy corridor. A sign opposite the lift said 'HUMAN SECTION'. Even though it was in Anglish, I couldn't be bothered to crow; I was getting a bad back from carrying Brinks, and was pretty sure that Leroy wasn't pulling his weight.

* * *

With Brinks snoring in the next room and no sign of Lucille, the three of us clustered around a data portal. Mary and Leroy did most of the work, so I took in our new home. It was almost as Spartan the Go-ship, but we did have separate bedrooms. There was single porthole-like window high up on the wall of the communal room. Standing on a chair, I found I could just see a sliver of inky-blackness peeking from behind the station's physical superstructure. I couldn't see any stars, which was a bit frustrating. I would have liked to have looked for old Sol, a hundred light years away across the immense, empty, frigid—

"Oh, bloody hell," I choked.

"Second stage," Mary said.

Leroy sniggered.

"Look at me," Mary said. "Breathe. Don't worry, it's a natural reaction to memory overlay."

"You're really pretty," I said. And she was. Prettier than all that frozen nothingness outside.

Leroy snorted something in French. It sounded obscene.

"Yes, I know," she said. "That's beside the point."

"Just take shallow breaths, Raymond."

"You called me Raymond! You've never done that before."

"Oh shut up!"

Feeling obscurely hurt by her tone of voice, I shut up. I was depressed enough without falling out with her. *What have I done? Would I ever get home*?

"You're just having a typical McNab response," Mary said. "It's nothing to worry about. You've gone through unfortunately brief bewilderment, then dumb happy resignation. Now its time for the final stage: *the oh my god what have I done I've been abducted by aliens I'm stuck doing a crazy, probably highly dangerous job that no one else in the galaxy would touch with a ten-meter-long people-prod all the aliens look down on me and my entire species I have no control*

over my life—why, oh why didn't I run when I had the chance? And so on, okay?"

"Okay?" I said.

"Yes."

Her hypo spray was called into action again.

* * *

I woke up determined to take charge of my life. I might have been abducted by aliens, spirited halfway across the galaxy, and drafted to do what was, apparently, the lousy job to end all lousy jobs. But I was still my own man. First chance I had I was going to get to know Mary better—a lot better.

She walked out of Leroy's bedroom.

"Welcome back to the land of the living. Ready to start work?" she asked, buttoning a shirt button.

"Suppose so," I muttered. Leroy was standing behind her, grinning from ear to ear.

"Good, we have work to do," she said, handing me a featureless white plastic card.

"Don't tell me- different EM spectrum," I said.

"No, just saving printing resources. It's a guide card. Just hold it against any wall, and it will show you how to get to your work assignments, and how to get back here."

"Any wall?" I asked.

"It's a good idea not to go too far off the marked paths. You're new here. Don't try to fly before you can crawl."

* * *

The card worked fine and, an hour later, I was scraping phosphorescent goo out of a blocked waste pipe. It was suffocatingly hot, and sweat was running down my face. With all the heat and moisture, I could hardly see the manky gunge I was hacking at with a none-too-effective plastic spatula. I could have taken my helmet off, of course, but I didn't want to choke on nitrogen oxides, or have my lungs seared by phosgene.

The Rapsilan-lo Empire was rumored to have been one of the mightiest of the old core empires. Although the Commonwealth outclassed them, they were still highly respected and given quite a lot of diplomatic leeway, such as not having to call ahead like most other non-carbon-based life-forms. They could turn up unannounced, and the local authorities were expected to sort out the necessities. This normally involved furious improvisation, and then calling in the humans to clear up the mess.

Ah, those rapscallions, chomping down on phospho-nitrogen fixing plant analogues, breathing out nitrogen oxides, and incinerating the local plumbing with their phosphorous oxide-rich droppings. I scraped vigorously while the part of my mind that didn't grow up with me chipped in with interesting factoids about Rapsilan-lo biochemistry. An unasked-for, over-academic study of the role of sugar analogs with phosphorus in hemiacetal rings in Rapsilan-lo metabolism, was the final straw.

I decided to rebel.

* * *

Rebelling was surprisingly hard. I didn't want to cause a war or anything, just tick the local authorities off with a bit of good, old-fashioned vandalism.

Don't scoff. It's one of the great British inventions, along with losing at sports we invented, and littering.

But what to do? Graffiti, although a noble tradition, seemed a bit pointless. Only the humans would understand my witty barbs, and they'd probably pretend not to be impressed. Breaking a window or two was obviously out of the question.

Then I remembered the Jalfizzle. I took a walk past the docking ports. In the two days I'd been on Halcyon Drift, it had moved all of thirty paces from where I first saw it. I had surprisingly little information crammed in my head about the species. They ate once every one-hundred and six standard years. The great event involved decade-long parties on their home world. While not too much seemed to be happening from the perspective of almost everyone else in the galaxy, the Jalfizzle were partying like there was no new millennium in view.

The ritual shedding of waste was more low-key, but also took place on their home world, and the public health concerns were minor. So I didn't get too much in the way of in-depth know-how implanted about them. I tried to look them (and their alleged wars) up on the station's datanet, but I couldn't find anything. Actually, all the human-centered channels seemed to be filled with cartoons, soap operas, pop videos and numerous versions of Shakespeare's Henry VI part two (the Commonwealth are big fans). I asked Mary, who told me that the databases were only maintained in the most important galactic languages. Courses were available she said, unhelpfully. I shrugged, and ordered some orange-stuff-coated mycoprotein pizza, a six pack of polymead, and settled in for a night checking the 'toons. It was just like being back at the university.

I woke up and felt myself getting angry. I couldn't decide whether it was McNab, or me, but it felt good. Why, I asked myself angrily, were the Jalfizzle's, very lengthy and excruciatingly slow piezoelectric warbling classed as more important than the language of Shakespeare and George Lucas? Any species that could be outpaced by an ambitious slab of sphagnum moss couldn't be too important.

* * *

Next morning, despite a banging head and a grumbling stomach, I was ready to strike a blow for poor, oppressed humanity!

For form's sake, I grumbled when they gave me the Rapsilan-lo waste-scraping job again.

"You're just the apprentice, you have to start at the bottom," Mary said, evidently without irony.

I did have a bleat, for appearance sake, about how Lucille never seeming to be around when there was work to be done. Mary gave me a filthy look, and Leroy grinned.

"It's not all glamour you know, English," Leroy added with his now perpetual smirk, then they trotted off somewhere where I wasn't.

Nothing much happened during the first few hours of my shift. The time passed slowly. I scraped and shoveled gunk and happily refined my dastardly plan. Just after lunch a furry little rodent-like creature sidled up and fixed its single eye on me. It was quite appealing, despite having three ears. I decided to make a pet out of it.

Mary and Leroy came running up.

"Don't move!" Leroy said.

"I rarely do," I said.

Without any warning, Mary whipped a miniature flame thrower out and torched the little blighter. Leroy picked up the carbonized remains with a pair of long-handed tongs.

"A lucky escape," he said.

"Oh yes, you're my heroes. Hang about, I'll see if I can find you some bunny rabbits to incinerate, cute baby ones preferably!" I said.

"It wasn't a bunny rabbit—" Mary said.

Even through her suit hood and centimeter-thick faceplate, I could see she was deadly serious. She was caressing her flame-thrower's trigger. I decided this wasn't a good time to ask when I was going to get one of my own.

"—it's a bioengineered construct, put together by the nanotech civilizations that live in the carpets on level sixteen. Their sense of humor doesn't translate well. They don't really understand that dicing biological organisms—"

"Even bloody fool English ones," Leroy added.

"—isn't funny."

"Oh, I don't know," Leroy said wistfully.

I looked at the tiny, crisped corpse.

"Dicing?"

"Very efficiently," Mary said. "The nanotechs don't have any conception of pain, or anesthesiology for that matter. Remember when we disembarked? The scraps of flesh you thought were litter?"

"Not litter?"

"A sliced and diced Farrblewont."

"A what?"

"Farrblewont," Mary said. "A six-meter-long gerbil analogue from Epsilon Eridani three. The Ngus keep them as pets. The nanos were shrewd enough to dispose of the evidence down a ventilation duct. Hence the mess. Leroy and I have been scouring the station, collecting the remains, and setting up nano-repellers."

"Ugh. Bastards! Hey, why doesn't the Commonwealth just, you know, bomb the carpets on level sixteen?" I asked.

"Is mass murder your solution to everything, English?" Leroy sneered.

I toyed with the idea of ripping my helmet and gloves off and giving him a good thumping. Of course, when I was arrested, Leroy couldn't wait to bring up my alleged genocidal tendencies.

"The nanotech societies have generic Commonwealth citizenship," Mary explained. "They have a right to live, just like everyone else in the galaxy."

"Apart from lawyers," I said.

"Obviously."

* * *

They decided that I couldn't be left alone in case there were other constructs wandering around. That suited me fine. It made the work go faster. In any case, I already had two little nuggets of faintly glowing phosphorus-rich Rapsilan-lo waste sealed in a polymead bottle hidden at the bottom of my toolkit.

* * *

Eyes watering from phosphorous dust, I looked up and down the corridor. The coast was clear. I rolled the monofilm-encased ball of Rapsilan-lo droppings across the floor. A perfect shot, stopping a couple of centimeters in front of the Jalfizzle. After an hour or so, the alleged life-form would crush the ball, and then we'd see just how lively it was. I know this makes me sound like someone who would enjoy pulling the wings off butterflies. But it *was* just a joke. All I expected were a few sparks and maybe a dull thud. In any case, I couldn't see how a few grams of phosphorous oxides (however fizzy), could harm a lump of semi-animate rock.

A chattering, slithering noise caught my attention. It sounded like something was crawling around in the corridor's walls. I hid around the corner.

When I looked back, there was no one there, apart from the Jalfizzle. Breathing a sigh of relief, I walked away casually. Then the screaming started. I knew at once it was the rock. It was like a mountain screaming—ice-cracking fissures, moraines grinding bedrock to dust, and the pitter-patter of pebbles looking forward to becoming a grown-up avalanche.

I increased my speed to a modest trot.

* * *

I was soon hopelessly lost, alone in a featureless corridor. There were no windows or signs. I trudged on. After a few minutes a gaggle of Brantfoat (or should that be Brantfeet?) marched past me. I greeted them politely, but they ignored me. In other circumstances I might have gotten peeved, but I was still spooked by the Vesuvius act.

The Brantfoat disappeared down a drop-shaft I hadn't noticed. After a short interval, I followed them. Midway through the descent, I remembered my guide card. That gave me a moment of comfort during the terrifying, lightless plunge. The drop-shaft reached the bottom eventually, and I stepped out into a dimly-lit corridor. I took out the card and confidently slapped it against the nearest wall.

I slapped it again, and again. It didn't seem to be working. Experimentally, I shook it (well, you never know), and tried again.

Nothing.

Teeth gritted, I edged slowly along the corridor. It curved away to my left and seemed to be heading slowly upwards. After a few paces, I tried the card again- still nothing.

Frustrated, I ground my heels in the carpeted floor. Then the carpeted floor sunk its heels into me.

"Oh bugger," I said.

* * *

"Don't move, you're surrounded," someone said in a squeaky voice.

I considered running. After all, how fast can nanos move? I had no idea, so I stayed put. Paralyzing fear helped too. Something black, amorphous and dumpy loomed in front of me. Constellations, or at least cities of tiny lights, played over its surface.

"Please don't dice me," I whined.

"Let's put it to a vote," the squeaky voice said.

"Lucille? Thank the fates. I'm saved!"

I reached toward my favorite crewmate. She stopped me with a clammy hand.

"Don't move! How many times do I have to tell you? You're surrounded."

My eyes were adjusting to the gloom, and I could see that she was wearing a full body, very tight fitting slick-skin suit. Some sort of field was flickering across the surface, illuminating a belly button here or a fold of …like the gentleman I am, I averted my eyes. Her similarly clad Brantfoat chums had turned up. I studiously kept my eye-line above their waists. I'd had enough disappointments for one day.

Instinctively, I edged back, and promptly fell over. One of the Brantfoat grabbed me before I hit the floor and pulled me upright.

"My feet, I'm stuck!" I shouted.

Lucille struck up a sibilant-rich, high-pitched conversation with her friends. Evidently she was fluent in Brantfoatian, but had to use a modulator to push her voice up an octave or six.

"The nanos have annexed your boots," she said eventually. "They are petitioning for vacant possession of your body."

"Tell them they can't have it! It's not vacant!"

"If you say so. Anyway, the negotiations are being conducted directly between the Commonwealth ambassador and the nano consensus."

"The nano what?"

"Consensus. Think of it as a cross between universal suffrage and Brownian motion. Don't worry. The Ambassador will make the final decision anyway, so there's no point in making a fuss."

One of her chums said something in his native gabble.

"You'll be happy to hear that the negotiations are complete. You can have your body back."

"Thank you," I said, passionately.

"Not so fast. Apparently you're in big trouble," she said.

"It wasn't me!"

"Yes it was. Oh, and as part of the treaty the nanos get to keep your clothes."

She turned to her friends. "Boys, the laser scalpels."

* * *

Shivering in a gray coverall, I was ushered in to the Ambassador's reception suite. An oblate metal cylinder hovered a meter off the floor. I wondered if that was the Ambassador. Everyone seemed to be pretending it wasn't there, so maybe it was. Or it could have just been a designer ashtray.

Station security, in the form of a femaloid Ubt, accompanied by a gaggle of hopeful maleoids was present, along with Mary, Leroy and Brinks.

"So, what happens next? Am I going to be fined, or what?" I asked.

"Fined!" Leroy shouted. "Do you have any idea what you've done?"

"Caused a public nuisance?" I suggested, not sure whether Leroy had shouted 'fined' or 'fiend'.

There was a hiatus while the maleoid Ubts had their way with the security officer. It didn't take long and, with her friends lying on their backs, happily spinning their wheels, she turned to face me. She (you understand I'm using the word 'she' here as shorthand, I have neither the time nor patience to go into the intricacies of Ubt physiology) was holding a dangerous-looking weapon in one of her dorsal claws.

Mary nudged Brinks forward. He gave me a sad look. It was the first and only time he

acknowledged my existence.

He did his party piece. This time it involved crouching down on his hands and knees, wiggling his bottom in the air, and then rolling over on his back while snapping his fingers. The security office regarded him with what I interpreted as a jaundiced expression (or possibly post-coital bliss). Then her weapon started chattering. Apparently it was a translator of some sort.

Brinks twitched dramatically for a few seconds, then slumped into a boneless heap. Mary knelt down and comforted him with her hypo-spray. He revived a little, and they had a brief, whispered conversation.

"You're under arrest for crimes against the Commonwealth," Mary said. "Specifically being the cause of the interstellar war that the Jalfizzle will launch against humanity in approximately two hundred years."

"I did what?"

"You were unlucky," Mary said. "As you stepped into the corridor, the station's security net spotted you. If the Domble-Domble colony hadn't passed by, your stupid prank would have been stopped before any real harm was done."

I was mystified. "What Domble-Domble colony?"

"Let me show you the security log," Mary said.

A flat screen holo popped into view. The show started, and there I was, hiding in my room, coughing as I wrapped Rapsilan-lo droppings in monofilm.

"Hey, are we under surveillance all the time? Even when we're, you know, in the bathroom for example?"

"Especially then," Leroy said. "Even now don't you understand how dangerous bathrooms are on space stations?"

The show continued. They watched me go into the corridor, and look around furtively. They must have doctored the image. I'm not that sneaky-looking. The screen split into three windows. The second window showed an outside view of the station, and a Domble-Domble colony swimming elegantly into view. Window three showed a femaloid Ubt, shrugging off her suitors, and then charging down a corridor.

The chattering, slithering noise played in multi-channel, high definition surround sound. In one screen window I was peeking around a corner, in another, out of my original field of view, the bag of phosphorous oxides was creeping towards the Jalfizzle. I glimpsed the Domble-Domble colony whirling away, but not before a last tug from its gravity organ pulled the little bomb right up to the Jalfizzle.

Then the screaming started. The replay had full vibration effects: the caterwauling of the Jalfizzle, and the drumming of my running feet, were presented in exquisite aural detail.

The holo evaporated.

"The problem is," Mary said, "that it was getting near that time of the century for the Jalfizzle, you know, when they eat. They have to be very careful around then. The sudden contact with phosphorous kicked its metabolism into high gear, and it went into a violent hot flush, accompanied by a sudden release of stored energy. "

"I gave it indigestion?"

"Big time, and you offended its sensibilities. Eating is a very private matter for the Jalfizzle, tied up with all sorts of social and, religious observances."

"They have religions?" I said. I'm not sure, but I think I heard Brinks humming 'Rock of Ages'.

"They won't elaborate," Mary continued, "and since the best guess is that they live for

billions of years, speculation is futile. Suffice to say, when it realizes what's happened, a couple of weeks from now, it isn't going to be too happy. In another month or two it will have reached its embassy. Six weeks later it will probably have figured out what species you belong to. After several days exchanging long-chain, silicon-based memory molecules with its pals, things will heat up. A hyper-light message will be sent to the Jalfizzle home world, and will they get riled up.

"The good news is that, being Jalfizzle, it will take them the best part of two hundred years to mobilize. The bad news is, that mobilization will take the form of a fleet of automatic planet-destroyers that go a lot faster than their creators. Once launched, it'll be centuries before the Jalfizzle start to wonder about how well the war is going, and if enough carnage has been caused to call things even. Even then it might take decades before they actually decided to stop the slaughter," Mary finished.

The room was silent apart from the randy-again maleoid Ubts trying to right themselves. Somehow I found the strength to speak.

"But do we really know all that will happen? Its just speculation, isn't it?"

"Yes, and the Commonwealth is fairly confident that a diplomatic solution can be found," Mary said.

"But not certain?"

"The Jalfizzle are rather set in their ways."

"Ho, ho. Now what?"

"The trial will begin," a new, metallic tinged voice said in unaccented Anglish. Everyone turned to face the hovering metal cylinder. It wasn't the Commonwealth Ambassador after all. It turned out to be a Jurisprudence Machine. I had no idea such things existed.

It took about six milliseconds to review the evidence and sentence me.

Let the punishment fit the crime is the Commonwealth way.

* * *

So they came up with this great idea. Take a human and slow his neural processes way down (they didn't specify how, and I didn't pry). Give him the memories of a skilled diplomat, and send him on a desperate mission to stop the war before it starts. There was a lot of other stuff about metabolism and bed sores, but I tuned it out. They did say that, though quite confident about my chances, they would look into evacuating the Earth, just in case.

The End

Nigel Atkinson is from Middlesbrough in the north east of England. His short story "An Exhalation of Butterflies", and novella "A Mouse in the walls of the Lesser Redoubt" are included in the 'Night Lands' anthology (Wildside Press, 2003). "Butterflies" gained an honorable mention in Gardner Dozosis' 20th Annual 'Year's best SF'. For more details on the Night Lands project, check the editorial website. *The book is available from Amazon and other on-line retailers.*

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knew personally or professionally: Calgary Yelm, owner of the most popular tavern and hostel in town, the Red Falcon. What they didn't know was that he was also a practicing wizard. Reader responses ranged from anger and confusion to nonchalant acceptance and encouragement toward Mr. Yelm. The Red Falcon suffered a brief drop in business due to an organized boycott, but only increased long-term, once it became clear that Calgary Yelm was here to stay. These days, he can still be found behind the bar, mixing drinks with practiced ease (and a few little tricks he can now show off), proudly displaying pictures of his three children and discussing all manner of political, religious and social topics. Business as usual.

But what of the others? Certainly Mr. Yelm is not the norm? Indeed not, though the minority is not quite so small as some may think. Thanks to Yelm's success, some wizards are realizing that it's possible to be a 'normal' member of society. Friends and families are no longer impossibilities. With this new integration comes the inevitable strife, ably demonstrated in a way words cannot by the recent furor over young Tom Ethelswinge (Ed: Vol. 270, '*Young Wizard Involved in Brawl at Orchard Pub*'). There are citizens here in Wayland, wizard and otherwise, who have yet to come to grips with the changing face of the city. Tempers are running high in certain districts, and there have been several violent clashes in recent months. The core of the issue is not misunderstanding, as some have suggested, but a *lack* of understanding at a basic level. Fear and hostility towards what we don't understand is a natural defense mechanism.

We have to consider, however, that wizardry is not a recent development in our society. If not for the plague—yes, I *promised* I wouldn't keep mentioning it (Ed: Vol. 265, '*Health Minister says City Well-Prepared for Flu Season*')—it seems likely we would be working and living alongside our magic-using friends without giving a second thought to the matter. In a perfect world...

This is not to say that we should 'suck it up' and 'deal with it.' We need open discussion of our common goals and clear ideas of *how* we can live with each other peacefully and productively; not just personal dedication to deal with the issue internally. The problems we face do not lie in the non-wizard realm alone, and consequently can't be solved there.

On a more general note, the fears many of us feel need to be confronted. (This is where we venture into rumorland again.) One juicy rumor making the rounds in Wayland's taverns (and homes, I'm sure) is that a certain group of 'dark mages' are planning to assault the City Center and assassinate one or more key city leaders. The intent, as the rumor has it, is that order will be disrupted long enough for them to establish a wizard-run oligarchy in which the common peoples of Wayland will be forced into slave camps and assigned to build a monstrous weapon with which the remaining free lands of Kenatos will be assaulted.

I'll not dignify that one with more time than I've already given it, much less a response, but there are more reasonable concerns among the populace, some of which may have given birth to the larger rumors. Most wizards have mastered the principle of levitation. Many have a degree of control over the environment around them, including (but not limited to) the elements themselves. Some, though I haven't heard of any recent occurrences, allegedly have the power to summon otherworldly beings temporarily into this one. And an accomplished few have reached a state the wizards call *akardinn* (from *akar*, 'vision', and *innei*, 'truth', for those of you who slept your school years away), in which they can access the raw magic directly. The potential uses and side-effects of *akardinn* are not yet known, and the reclusiveness of those purported to have achieved this does little to allay the fears of those who already view wizards and their ilk with suspicion.

This reclusive tendency is still present among the majority of wizards, who seem to prefer

peace and quiet in which to study, experiment, create their various potions (the latter, for various reasons, is commonly viewed as a benefit to society, though few care to elaborate on these reasons) and contemplate the mysteries of the universe. It's easy to understand why they dislike (or simply avoid) the company of their fellow humans; many of those humans view them with fear, jealousy and often hostility. Fortunately, many wizards realize that there are many of us who have the utmost respect for them as human beings, neighbors and citizens of Wayland, not just the power (beg pardon, 'energy') they wield.

They shouldn't have to feel that we're just keeping them around for their wards and healing powers. And we shouldn't have to fear them. So next time you come across a furtive-looking young man with a stack of books and some suspicious-looking vials, don't ask him what the plague he thinks he's doing; say hello. Get his name. Give him yours. It's the polite thing to do. And it's the right thing to do.

Because the wizards are here to stay.

—Lycelle Timas

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Lycelle Timas, Editor
The Wayland Messenger
12 Marin St., Roke District.
City of Wayland

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copy of the Great Hall in Orlath, the place where his mother met with foreign nobles and other people she wanted to impress. Pheron had been given tours of it often enough when his mother wanted to astound him with the "grand history" of Orlath, though it hadn't actually been used since the arrangements of the twins' betrothals.

The ceiling arched overhead until it was lost beyond the reach of the light of the lamps flickering on the walls. The walls themselves were smooth carved stone, though Pheron could feel an extra roughness when he casually let his hand press against them. Chairs filled the floor, creating a cluttered look that strove with and challenged the high ceiling for supremacy. The only detail that was different was the presence of a long black line on the wall. Pheron squinted, trying to make out the mural it might belong to.

"Welcome to my home."

Pheron looked around at the sound of Jienna's voice, forgetting the black line for the moment. She smiled at him, sitting in one of the bigger chairs. A small table laden with many different kinds of meat stood in front of her. "Sit down, and eat," she said. "I know you must be hungry."

"Why did you copy Orlath's Great Hall?"

"It's a place I have fond memories of. What other reason do I need? Sit down, and eat." She nodded to Seros as well, who hovered in the background.

"What place is this?" asked Seros.

"A *culanota*."

Pheron didn't recognize the word, but he saw Seros's eyes widen in respect—or possibly fear. "You are indeed powerful, my lady," he murmured and sat down in a chair near the door, as far as possible as he could get from Jienna while maintaining a modicum of politeness. "You are more powerful than I ever thought or feared that you were."

Jienna smiled at him and then nodded to Pheron. "Come and sit down with us, Pheron. It's perfectly safe."

"What kinds of meat are those?"

Jienna raised her brows and laughed. "You don't really believe the stories that say the Darkworkers feed on human flesh, do you, Pheron?"

"I don't know." Pheron studied the meats but still didn't recognize them. Of course, he had never really paid that much attention to how food was prepared. It was there, and he ate it. "But given the villages we've ridden past in the last few days, I'm not sure that cooked human flesh would smell any different to me than, say, goat or cow."

Jienna's face softened at once. "Yes, that was a terrible experience for you, wasn't it?" she asked.

Pheron shook his head. He was never going to understand all the changes that a Darkworker's mind could go through. "You were the one who took me through the villages."

"But not the one who burned them." As if that were supposed to make a difference, she again waved a hand at the table.

Warily, Pheron sank down, then took the piece of meat that she handed to him and bit into it before he could convince himself otherwise.

Beef. He relaxed. It was rawer than he would have liked, but he was grateful enough to eat something that wasn't the hard cheese Seros carried in his pack. He finished the meat and licked at his fingers, only to find Jienna offering another piece.

"You don't really think that I would try to turn you into a cannibal, do you?" she asked with evident hurt when he hesitated over it.

Pheron took a deep breath and bit into this one as well.

A moment later, he was spitting frantically. He hadn't recognized the taste, and just the thought that he could have eaten someone else…his stomach heaved.

"No, no, it's just ryalta bird," said Jienna, laughing. "You've probably never tasted them before. The Light thinks them too cute to eat." For a moment, Pheron thought she would spit in disgust, but she refrained. "But they can be cooked, and they are very good."

Pheron met her eyes. "I've tasted cooked ryalta bird before," he said. "I cooked some when I first left the castle."

Jienna was silent for a moment, staring at him. Then she turned and picked up another piece, offering it to him.

Pheron bit into beef again and settled back to chew. Seros was eating in the chair beside him, he noticed, licking his fingers and snatching at meat again and again with no pause to check it for taste or smell. Of course, it probably wasn't a great concern for him.

"Let's see," murmured Jienna as Pheron managed to locate something that was recognizably the leg of a chicken. "We have to begin your training." She laughed at his expression. "You didn't think that I would bring you here just to be a helpless hostage, did you?"

"I thought so."

Jienna shook her head. "You are far too valuable for that." She, too, snatched another piece of meat and ate it without pause. "Someone kept mute from the world for however long this war lasted would be of no use to me. No, my lord, you shall receive training. The left-handed training that Seros gave you will make you a fighter again. But you need to be trained how to use your mind."

That stung, even though it shouldn't. Pheron set his teeth. "I can read and write," he said. "And do simple math. And I know most of Orlathian history and the legends."

Jienna sighed in mock sorrow. "But you don't know the history and legends of the other kingdoms, do you? Much less their languages."

"There are few books available in translation from Doralissan," said Pheron, feeling his face burn. "Or any of the other languages."

"Why did your mother not insist that you learn Doralissan? I understand that both the Prince Hanir and the Princess Emmeldra did."

Pheron wondered how she had known that and then decided not to ask. It probably wasn't very secret. His mother had been proud of the accomplishments of her Destined children and nosed them far and wide. "They were marrying a prince and princess from Doralissa. Of course they would have to know the language."

"And your brother Leroth?" Jienna settled back in her chair, staring at Pheron. Pheron shivered in spite of himself. Jienna looked less than human, with half her face in shadow and what was visible glistening with juices from the meat.

"He thinks it's a romantic language, and he loves to be romantic." Pheron shrugged. "I take it you want me to learn Doralissan?"

"You'll need it."

"For what?"

Jienna smiled. "Not yet."

"The mystery doesn't intrigue me, you know, and it doesn't make me want to cooperate with you." Pheron leaned forward. "If you want me to cooperate with you, the best thing you could do is to tell me openly what it is that you want."

"And if you betrayed us?"

"To whom?" Pheron snorted and folded his arm and stump across his chest. "You won't even let me leave here if I don't perform to your satisfaction, and how is anyone else supposed to guess where I am and rescue me?"

"Destiny."

"I have none."

"Not yours, that of others." Jienna shook back her hair and rose to her feet. "One of your siblings might make a spirited attempt to rescue you, and then they could find you. Destiny always leads its favored to where it wants them to go. No, my Lord Pheron, I suggest that you remain ignorant for now." She eyed him. "But not that dirty or that ill-clad. Your room is at the top of the stairs." She nodded to what Pheron had assumed was a curtain on some window but might actually be a drape over a hidden doorway. "You'll find a bath waiting for you there. Take it, please."

Pheron didn't move. "That is where my brother Hanir's room would be if this were the castle," he said.

"What of it?" Jienna's face was still.

"What are you doing?"

Jienna shook her head. "I told you, my lord, you will learn the truth in good time. Now, I suggest you retire. You have had a long ride, and I won't give you much time to prepare in the morning. Your lessons begin at noon at the latest, and that is less than seven hours from now. Farewell." She turned and swept out of the room by another door, calling, "Coming, Seros?"

Seros stood up to follow her, giving Pheron a guarded glance. "Hold yourself carefully," he said. "Nothing is what it seems."

"I know that." *And I know that about you, too, my Lord of Gazania.* Pheron watched the pair leave.

At least Seros had been more honest about matters than Jienna—but Pheron didn't really think that meant he could trust the man.

He stood and walked across the room to the curtain, drawing it aside to reveal a flight of stone stairs. They even looked to be of the same depth and height as the ones that wound up to Hanir's room in the castle. Pheron set himself and put one foot on the stairs.

The stairs didn't turn into a ramp and spill him down. Perhaps Jienna was above such childish tricks, though Pheron thought not. Or perhaps she had simply decided not to play any tonight. It was possible that the ride had tired her as well.

He reached the top without incident and drew another curtain back to see a room larger than Hanir's and better appointed. Tapestries hung everywhere, though the threads they used and the scenes they depicted weren't familiar to Pheron. Most of them seemed to involve dragons, burning with bright and vivid colors. Here and there a mage stood with hands glowing blue. That was a curious thing, Pheron noted as he glanced about. All the mages in the tapestries had Azure magic.

Well, it was a room in Jienna's home, and he supposed she could decorate it however she liked.

The bed took up a good half of the room, wide and sprawling with vivid blue cushions and curtains around the sides. Pheron glanced at it sidelong. He hadn't slept in a bed like that since he was twelve and it finally dawned on his mother that he wouldn't show any more magic than his ball of clay. But he didn't have to deal with it at the moment, since a great copper tub stood in front of the massive fire and steamed.

Carefully, he stripped off his clothes, wincing as they clung to his skin. Some of the laces

were a little difficult with one hand, but he managed it by slipping the very end of his stump into them and holding them in place while he tugged at the loops. When the tunic was off and the trousers most of the way down, the stench hit him. Pheron coughed, wondering how he had ridden for three days without smelling himself.

Come to that, the last time he could remember having a sense of smell was before he entered the sewers. If it came back now, he at least had a bath waiting.

He slid his undergarments off with another hook of his stump and then walked gingerly over and slid into the water.

A little too hot for my taste but otherwise wonderful. He scrubbed at his skin. Scaly patches of dirt peeled off and swirled in the water. More grime followed, and Pheron wondered if the bath would be gray by the time he was done with it.

Well, that was what it was for, after all.

He ducked his head as well, scraping at it with a small bar of yellow soap he found on the edge of the tub, and smiled a little as it finally looked brown again, instead of the gray-brown it had turned. He would need to do something about it soon. It hung down past his shoulders…

The water was wonderful…

Pheron found his eyes closing, his body relaxing into sleep in the water whether he willed it or no. He sighed and closed his eyes of his own volition. At least he could relax here for a little while before he got into bed.

Abruptly, the water closed around his body and squeezed. Pheron gasped with pain as his ribs flared and scrambled out of the tub.

Looking down, he saw Jienna's face briefly form in the water and heard her laughter. "You don't want to fall asleep like that," she said. "Think of it as a test. You'll have many such, if I decide that you should stay here." And then her face dissolved into little ripples and was gone.

Pheron stood there and panted for a moment, then dropped his clothes into the water to get as clean as they could and climbed into the bed, closing his eyes. He would sleep naked for tonight, as uncomfortable as it made him feel. There was no Damned Spider to creep up and bite him on the back of his neck while he slept, at least.

Pheron was surprised to find that he actually missed the thing.

Oh, well, he thought as he finally relaxed into true sleep. *It's not as though there won't be excitement here, to keep me from thinking too deeply about that.*

Chapter Thirty-Nine
Going Home

"Never believe all the stories you hear of the Dark. No matter what they say, there is always something worse hiding behind and under the apparent truth."

—From Artifacts of the Dark: Stories and Legends.

Leroth woke to the sound of chanting.

It didn't really surprise him, he thought, as he lay still and listened. The chants were

much like the ones he had heard the priestesses utter to Elle, when he had come to the ceremonies that weren't usually open to the public because the goddess favored him. They melted and flowed into each other, and sometimes it wasn't easy to tell what was a word and what was only sound.

But the elves couldn't create any of the effects the priestesses could. Leroth was certain of that.

They might try to subject him to one of their foul rites, but the Light would intervene and rescue him. He wouldn't make a good sacrifice, with that knowledge—and they had to have that knowledge—hanging over their heads. He only had to have patience.

Leroth waited.

The chanting continued, and then abruptly the blackness disappeared from his eyes again. Leroth looked around and found himself in a ring of elves and trees.

They seemed to be true trees this time and not caves, though the elves still shifted and flowed from jeweled clothes to forest ones if he spent too long looking at them. The full moon, or a full moon, was just ascending above them. Leroth looked up at the face of the Fair One and felt a deep calm settle over him. Elle was watching him from the moon. She would rescue him.

One of the elves said something in their flowing tongue. Another answered. Then one of them brought forth a deep scarlet chalice circled with gold at the top. Leroth smirked. He should have thought that something like this would happen. They were going to collect his blood in the chalice, probably to try and use it to open the gate from Dezeywandu to his own world.

It wouldn't work. Leroth was confident of that. He couldn't recall all the legends about the elves with the spirit-sickness Aneron had confined, but he did know that a member of Queen Aneron's family was essential in some way or another to help them open the gate. And there was no way they would find treachery in his blood. He was too devoted to Orlath.

The female elf who had brought him out of his strange cell crouched before him. "Are you ready?" she asked, a long and corpse-white finger touching Leroth's cheek.

Leroth stared at her calmly. "You can't touch me."

"Yes, we can," she said and then drew a silver knife and sliced at his left arm.

A flare of white light ran over his skin, and the knife was turned back. Leroth laughed aloud and was aware that the elves had stopped chanting and were watching him.

Undaunted, the elfwoman turned and cut at his right arm.

Leroth drew breath to laugh again and screamed instead. The knife had gone home this time, and he could feel his blood sliding across the knife, hot and slick. The elfwoman smirked at him and dipped the chalice, catching the liquid.

"Thank you, my lord," she said sweetly and then turned back to the circle of elves and raised the cup. They answered with a shout.

Feebly, Leroth turned his head to watch the elfwoman's progress up the circle of elves to an altar under a gnarled old tree, still reeling with the shock. Why had she been able to do that? There was no treachery in his blood, especially not to the line of Queen Aneron, and that was the only way she should have been able to take it. And why had the magic protected one arm but not the other?

As he stared, still blinking in shock, the elfwoman spilled his blood over the altar, which looked like a shining white stone, from what Leroth could see of it.

The altar's glow dimmed in a moment. Leroth thought black light had taken its place and craned to see, struggling against his bonds. Then he saw it wasn't dark light at all but the outline of a door that slowly swung open as he watched.

No!

Leroth drew breath and screamed for Elle.

All the elves sighed as the door opened wider and wider. Where Leroth expected it to look on Orlath, though, it showed only darkness. It might have been a night scene—very faintly, Leroth fancied he could make out stars—but it looked more like formlessness.

The elves didn't seem upset. The elfwoman turned and came back to him and said calmly, "Thank you. With your willing cooperation, we could have opened both doors, but we have opened one of the two that we must, and for that we thank you."

Leroth stared into her pale, unmoving face and wondered if she saw the irony in thanking a prisoner who lay bound and unwilling. Probably not.

"You're going to take more blood from me and open the other door, aren't you?" he asked, his voice hysterical with fear.

The elfwoman shook her head and drew something long and white out of her changing clothes, now a robe, now a dark green tunic with a bow over the shoulder. "We can't use the same blood to open both doors, unless it's willing," she said, as she bound his wound with the white cloth. "That means that we shall have to find another prince or princess of Orlath."

"My brother and sister would never betray Orlath."

"Why not?" The faint smile brushed across the elfwoman's face. "You did."

Leroth opened his mouth to speak and then looked at his arm again. The evidence that he had betrayed it was there, staring him in the face.

"Why could you cut me?" he mumbled.

"If you don't know, I certainly won't." The elfwoman's words were cheerful, almost human. Leroth fixed on them as the glade around them faded away and was replaced by the walls of the cave where he had originally been held. "I assume it was something that you did or said, something that turned you against the kingdom of Orlath or the blood of Queen Aneron." She dipped a finger in the last open part of his wound, touched it to her lips, and sighed. "Nothing sweeter than the blood of a traitor."

"*I am not a traitor.*" Leroth made his voice low and intense, so low and intense it should impress even a dark-souled elf.

The elfwoman laughed at him, the sound like silver bells, and then bent and kissed his lips, giving him a taste of his own blood. "You are," she said. "And I should thank you. Thanks to you, we will be getting out of the sterile world of Dezeywandu and going home." She paused, staring at him with distant eyes as the smile left her face again. "And so will you, I would imagine."

"The King would send me home?"

"Of course. You're no danger now."

Leroth clenched his hands in his bonds. "I demand a duel with him!"

"Do you?" The elfwoman smiled. "I suppose that he might grant you that, if it amused him. I will carry the challenge to him and tell you what he says." She turned and walked into the darkness, disappearing as if through the wall.

Leroth, left alone, closed his eyes.

Elle, he prayed desperately. *Oh, my lady, why did you not come to my aid? Could you not reach me through the boundaries of the worlds?*

Even as he had the thought, he dismissed it. There was nothing that Elle could not do. She restrained her power so that her servants could have the pleasure of serving her, no more.

Leroth paused.

Sometimes, she would test her servants.

Could it have been that he had been tested and been found wanting?

Elle, he said silently, and then aloud he chanted the Prayer of Contrition. He didn't think any of the elves who were kin to darkness would know what it was, and if they did, they could join in and perhaps have a chance of turning back to the Light.

"Ah, Elle, my Lady who rides the night sky,
Who looks through the moon and abounds in flowers,
I come before you, a humble supplicant—I,
Who have been broken by the weight of the hours,
And know now that what I did was utterly wrong,
I come before you, and sing the penitent's song.

"Ah, Lady, my Lady, broken before you am I,
And cowering, I implore you to heed my prayer.
I am the least of all things beneath your bright sky,
And I do not deserve to breathe your pure air.
And I know that what I did was utterly wrong.
I come before you, and sing the penitent's song.

"Ah Lady, my Lady, I huddle here, and will give
Whatever you want, whatever price you demand,
So that I may continue to both love you and live.
Pray, stretch out to me your grim and punishing hand!
I know now that I what I did was utterly wrong.
I come before you, and sing the penitent's song."

The Prayer of Contrition went on, flowing past his lips without Leroth having to take conscious heed of it, so many times had he sung it and heard it sung. Leroth fell within himself meanwhile, his mind frantically searching for the action he could have taken that would have betrayed the Kingdom of Orlath or the blood of Queen Aneron.

What could he have thought or done or said…?

It didn't take him long to find it. It lay in the middle of his mind, shining with the dark light that any guilty secret should radiate. Leroth cried out when he found it and opened his eyes, blinking the tears away.

He had to recite it. The goddess had to hear the words and know that Leroth knew what he had done was wrong, rather than his clutching it to himself like a prized possession.

"I should never have told my mother that I thought Hanir was of the Dark," he whispered. "I didn't think that, not really, and it was wrong to say it. It convinced my mother to declare me Heir to Orlath, but that was wrong and petty. I should care about serving the Light and serving you, not about something that belongs to the mortal kingdoms of the world and will pass. It was treason to Orlath, depriving it of the ruler my mother always intended it to have, and it was treason to the blood of Queen Aneron, saying that a descendant of hers was unfit to rule the kingdom she founded."

Leroth sighed as peace settled on his soul. He had done it. Now he had only to go to sleep and hope that Elle would forgive him.

"Thank you, Lady," he whispered and slept, the pain in his arm a stinging reminder of his treachery against his brother.

Chapter Forty
Blending

"Darkworkers aim to teach two things every lesson-what the lesson is superficially about, and something that will be useful in the war against the Light. It does not do to forget that this war is endless."

—Relingath, ancient Queen of the Dragons.

"Up!"

Something hit Pheron in the head. He sat up abruptly, cursing, and then ducked as something else streaked past his ear and shattered on the untapestried stone behind his bed.

"Up, my lady says."

Pheron waited a moment, but no more missiles were forthcoming. He peered over the end of his feet at the man who stood there and caught his breath. Though he thought the man was human, he had never seen such rough and ridged skin in his life.

"What are those?" he asked.

"Scars," said the man, without a pause. "Earned honorably. Are you coming, or do I have to pull you out of bed by the foot? I assure you that my lady didn't tell me I couldn't do that."

"Who are you?"

"Haljen is my name. I'm your servant for now. Well, servant and part of your training. Lady Jienna has laid out fresh clothes for you." He held up a blue tunic as proof. "She wants you up. You should have been out of bed before now. It's noon already."

Pheron slowly sat up and slid out of bed, keeping a wary eye on Haljen. The man stood no taller than he did at the shoulder but hunched over further, as if he wanted to look smaller. He wore a tunic and trousers cut too short for him; Pheron thought that was deliberate, too, since the edges of the cloth showed sharp cuts and not tatters. Every inch of his visible skin was covered with thick and twisting scars. A glow of Destiny surrounded him but a muted one, and now and then the golden glow of a Crop mage, as he apparently told the stones things that Pheron couldn't hear.

"Much better," said Haljen, voice grinding as if it hurt him to give that much praise. "The Lady is waiting for you downstairs." He turned and started to waddle away.

Pheron had been looking at the clothes and cleared his throat before Haljen opened the door. Haljen turned back. "Yes?"

"I can't get this on by myself," said Pheron, holding up the tunic. The laces were more complicated than any he had ever seen, and he wasn't sure if he would have been able to tie them with even two hands. He was sure he couldn't manage it with one. "Or these." He dropped the tunic and picked up the trousers. These had buttons instead of laces, something that Pheron had seen mostly on clothes imported from Doralissa. He was very sure he couldn't manage to hold a

buttonhole and force a button through.

"Do you want me to help you?"

"Please."

"Did servants help you in the castle?"

"No."

"Then why didn't you learn to manage?"

"The wound is recent."

Haljen studied him for a moment and then waddled back. "My lady didn't mention this," he said, just loud enough for Pheron to hear, as he picked up the tunic.

"Perhaps it is part of the test," said Pheron.

"Perhaps." Haljen undid all the laces on the tunic with practiced speed, then held it out. Pheron turned and let the man drape it over his shoulders, ducking a little when he heard Haljen catch his breath in pain. He guessed that the scars pulled at Haljen's movements. "But the Lady Jienna won't like it if you show up naked."

Pheron nodded and turned back, letting Haljen show him to manage the laces. He watched closely and thought that perhaps he might manage by himself soon enough. If not, he would find something else that would help him. Haljen shouldn't have to keep on doing this for him.

Undergarments were next, and Haljen helped him with those with a practiced coolness that eased Pheron's nerves. Then trousers, and these Pheron knew he wouldn't be able to manage by himself. But that was part of the test, wasn't it?

Why, though? What would giving him clothes like these accomplish for Jienna? What was he supposed to do as the result of these clothes?

Perhaps learn to depend on someone else. Perhaps get used to servants. Perhaps get used to wearing clothes like this.

Pheron smiled grimly. Perhaps drive himself mad by wondering just what the clothes were supposed to accomplish.

"Come, my lord," said Haljen when he finished. "The Lady awaits you in her morning room."

"The Great Hall?" asked Pheron, following him to the door.

"No, my lord." Haljen gave him a quick, curious glance. "That doesn't have any windows. It wouldn't make much of a morning room."

Pheron laughed and then blinked. When was the last time he'd done that? "You're right, it wouldn't," he said, noticing that Haljen was staring at him. "If you would guide me, I would be grateful."

Haljen guided him down the stairs, across the Great Hall, and through the door that Jienna and Seros had taken the night before. It opened into a room so bright that Pheron blinked and lifted his hand to shield his face. There was sunlight coming through the windows, but more than that, there were mirrors positioned around the room to reflect the beams and bounce them until they nearly blinded him.

"Welcome, Pheron," said Jienna. "You are only a little late. Haljen, stay here for a moment," she added, as the servant apparently turned back towards the door. "I think that you should see this."

Pheron didn't turn to look at Haljen and didn't see what expression was on the servant's face. He didn't dare turn away from Jienna. He would have liked to look at Haljen, though, and learn how willing the man's service to Jienna was.

"Call your magic," said Jienna, eyes fixed on him. At least, Pheron thought they were. She

stood in a full beam of sunlight falling through a window, and her features were a dark blur. But she was facing him, and her voice sounded as if she were paying attention, at least.

Pheron held out his hand and concentrated. The ball of clay appeared. Vaguely, he could see his reflections in the mirrors doing the same thing.

Nothing happened. Jienna apparently stared at him, but Pheron didn't know what should happen and remained still.

"I don't understand," said Jienna then, frustration cracking her voice. "The mirrors should have made more balls of clay appear."

Pheron had never heard *that*. "My lady?"

"Mixed elemental magic," said Jienna impatiently. "It lives in the natural world, not the elemental realms, and it can react with things of our world in ways that the pure elements can't. Your magic is a blending of the Azure and the Crop. I've seen a few others who had similar blendings, and they could be reflected and multiplied by the mirrors. A Dust mage, for example—someone who blends the Gust and the Crop—could make more clouds of Dust appear by calling it in front of a mirror."

"A suggestion, my lady?" Pheron was started to hear Haljen's voice sound confident.

"Yes, Haljen?"

"We've never seen a Clay mage before. Is it possible that Clay magic doesn't function quite like the other kinds of magic?"

Jienna sighed and stepped forward out of the sunlight so that Pheron could at last see her face. Her features were fixed in a brooding tightness, and her eyes fastened on Pheron's ball of clay as if she would like to dig into it and find out its secrets. "It's possible," she said. "But I suspect something else, something more frustrating." Her gaze rose to Pheron's face. "Do you have prophetic dreams?"

Pheron blinked and shook his head.

"Never?" Her voice was sharp with impatience again. "I thought prophetic dreams came to all of Queen Aneron's blood, and I am sure that you are of Queen Aneron's blood. Your mother bore you, even if you had a different father than your brothers and sister."

Pheron breathed out lightly and reminded himself that now was not the time to lose his temper. Just because she should have been able to see by his nonexistent aura of Destiny that he wasn't a bastard… "I have fragments of dreams, sometimes. They show up and are gone. I can never remember them enough to do anything useful with them."

"And you're not favored of animals?"

"No."

"And you've never been favored of Elle?"

Pheron shook his head. He had attended the goddess's ceremonies on those days he had to attend, but he had never felt anything that he would have called the goddess speaking to him. Ceremonies were mainly an exercise in boredom.

Jienna's mouth pursed further, as if she had bitten into bad news. "I thought so," she said, but when Pheron looked at her questioningly, she only asked another question. "And your aura of Destiny has never been any stronger than it is now?"

"What aura of Destiny?"

Jienna made a sharp, slashing motion with one hand. "So you have none. That is what I thought, but I wanted to make sure." She turned away and moved into the sunbeam again. "How familiar are you with theories of elemental magic, my lord?"

"I would know no more than any other noble of Orlath," said Pheron, shrugging. "Some

people have connections to the elemental planes, and they can call the elements and act as conduits for their power. They can also sometimes manipulate the natural manifestations of the elements, such as your power over the waterfall, my lady. That is the basic nature of the theory."

"And can the elements blend?"

"I thought not. But I see that I am proved wrong."

"Perhaps," said Jienna and paced over to the wall, becoming visible as she passed out of the sunbeam once more. She laid a hand on the stone, and a panel slid aside with a groan. "Come here, Pheron. Haljen, you are dismissed. I will call you again when we are ready for the evening meal."

Pheron heard the door open and close as he crossed over to stand at Jienna's side. He felt unexpectedly bereft without the servant at his back. At least, there was no longer anyone else to deflect Jienna's anger from himself.

He looked up at the design on the wall revealed by the sliding of the panel, on the evidence that Jienna was gesturing to it and seemed to want him to look at it.

He caught his breath. It was a representation of the Cycle but done with such skill that he didn't find it boring as he usually did. A wave and a flame opposed each other across a golden circle, as did a sheaf of corn and a cloud. That was usual, though the richness of the color was not.

The circle was hollow, though, and that was not usual. Lines linked the elements, and where they intersected, there were representations of new elements, five in all. Where the flame and the cloud crossed, for example, a bolt of lightning was rendered. And where Crop and Gust faced each other, as Jienna had told him, was a dust cloud. In fact, there was only one blank space, and that was where the wave and corn would have crossed.

Jienna turned to stare at him. "We have long wondered what the element would have been that was composed of Crop and Azure," she said simply. "Clay is as good a guess as any. But your magic does not follow the patterns of the other elemental magics. They can be multiplied by mirrors, and yours can't. You can see that this is somewhat worrisome for us."

Pheron had recovered the balance temporarily stolen from him by the magnificence of the Cycle painting. He shook his head. "I have never demonstrated any greater talent than I have now. And I did experiment." The memory of the long and lonely experiments rushed back on him, and he had to swallow before he could continue. "I can't call a larger bit of clay, or two balls at once, or any ball that does anything. I'm sorry."

Jienna sighed. "And your having no aura of Destiny at all…I've heard of Orlathian Princes and Princesses who were forgettable, who married someone to seal a bargain or did something else random and boring that only royalty can. But they had small auras of Destiny. I've read back through the old books, and they all mention it. Barely sensed but there. Dragons could see them, though they had to squint. But dragons are blind to you, and you have no aura of Destiny at all." She stared at Pheron again. "It would certainly make things easier on everyone if you turned out to be a foundling. It would set our theories back on track."

"But mess up your own plans, wouldn't it?" asked Pheron, recalling that Jienna had said she needed a Prince of Orlath.

"Yes. I do think that you will be useful. Come." Jienna turned and paced to the other end of the room and towards yet another door that led back into the wall of the castle. "You haven't had anything to eat yet today, and you should."

Pheron followed her, but before he could go through the door, Jienna said, with no inflection in her voice, "Have you figured out the lesson of the clothes?"

"It could be that you wanted me to get used to Haljen helping me," said Pheron, meeting her eyes and hoping he hadn't guessed wrong.

Jienna smiled a little. "A good guess," she said. "That is something that could be right, at least, and it would make a good deal of sense."

"But it's not that?"

"No."

Pheron bit his lip. "You want me to become accustomed to help?"

Jienna moved her head in a fraction of a nod. "We all fight together in the war against the Light, especially now that the *Grellan Ashen* has been invoked."

"What is that?"

"I will tell you over our meal." Jienna paused. "And there is one more thing that I have to ask you. Why would the dragons be searching for you?"

"Because I wounded their Queen?" Pheron asked blankly, the question so unexpected he could come up with nothing else.

"No," said Jienna. "Perhaps I should have asked about a specific dragon. The red, Bloodsinger. He's been wheeling over my home, which he can hardly see as it is, and seizing and questioning my servants. Why would he be looking for you?"

Pheron swallowed, a sick feeling in his stomach. "He flew Cloudshadow back home. He's probably very loyal to her and wants to kill me."

Jienna smiled. "I almost feel sorry for you. Red dragons are inventive at torture, and vengeful, and they do not forget." She turned towards the door again. "Let us feast, and perhaps that will help you forget about your troubles."

Perhaps, Pheron thought as he followed her. *But I doubt it.* Vengeful red dragons were enough to take up anyone's mind.

Chapter Forty-One
The People of the Blending

"There are always things that we cannot know, things that we cannot trust in. The Dark and Light do their best, but some stories and legends escape even them. All we can do is trust that the goddess and the Cycle know what they are doing, and bow our heads, and pray."

—Yillos Goldfleet.

Hanir blinked. He hadn't expected to open his eyes again, and he certainly hadn't expected to open them on the scene that now presented itself.

He was still underground; a stone ceiling and walls encircled him. But if he hadn't glanced up and seen those he would never have known it. In front of him, a stone fountain danced, the water that curled from the mouth of the shapeless figure in the center an almost piercing blue. It smelled fresh, without a taint of salt, and slowly Hanir crept forward and dipped a hand in it, then clasped the hand to his mouth as his fingers cupped the water. It tasted so sweet that he nearly wept. This was elemental Azure, he thought, or he was a failure at recognizing elemental

magic.

He leaned back on the rough stone floor and stared at the figure in the center. It wasn't really shapeless. It was a writhing mass of tentacles from most sides, but when he moved about a quarter of the way around the fountain's circle, limping on bruised and shaky legs, he saw that it did have a head. He thought it was a kraken, a great octopus-like monster of the waves.

"Welcome, Prince of Orlath."

Hanir turned sharply at the hissing voice. A throne stood there, so close to him that he wondered how he could have missed noticing it before. A figure sat on the throne, regarding him with eyes that shone such a piercing red he blinked in the light.

Hanir waited, but the figure said nothing else. Apparently, he was expected to respond to the greeting. He cleared his throat cautiously. "Who are you?"

"Do you not recognize the creature in the fountain?" Something that might have been a head, and then again might not have, nodded to the kraken figure.

"A kraken," said Hanir. "But that doesn't tell me who you are. I'm sorry," he added, when the red eyes flared with something he took to be affront.

"No," whispered the figure, in that voice like someone shoveling grave dirt. It seemed pleased. "It shows that our agents have done their work well if no trace of our presence is left in the world above. We wished that it should not be left, and so it was removed. Good." The figure stood up then, and Hanir gasped aloud as he stared at the rags of gray skin that hung from a body that was little more than bones. "I suppose I shall have to show you what I am."

It held up a hand, and Scarlet flickered to life in its palm, more easily and more quickly than Hanir thought even he himself could call it. Then it held up its other hand, and a blue glow surrounded the skin. The water in the fountain surged in response.

"You command Scarlet and Azure?" asked Hanir faintly.

The figure turned towards him. Its head rested uneasily on its shoulders, looking so heavy it should tip forward. "Yes." As it spoke, a wind stirred Hanir's hair, and the rock trembled beneath his feet. "And Gust and Crop."

Hanir shook his head even as he backed away, fumbling for his sword. Ulua was not at his side. He folded his arms and tried to pretend he hadn't been looking for it. "That is impossible. No one can command more than one of the elements."

"None of your human mages trained in the ways of elemental magic can," the figure corrected him smugly. "But my people can."

"Who are you?"

"The People of the Blending," said the figure, and Hanir thought he heard whispering voices echo the words from the walls of the cave. He shivered and tried to convince himself that those were just ordinary echoes. "We joined our nature with the nature of the elements long ago, and we can command all four of them."

"You're *dead*."

"No," said the figure. "Merely not alive in the way that you understand it. We joined our natures with the elemental magic, I said. I have called up the nearest shapes I could find in the Crop to face you, and I thought you might be more comfortable if you used human bones."

"I am not," said Hanir tightly.

The figure shrugged its shoulder bones. "Very well." There was a brief blur of light, and suddenly the cave shone so brightly that Hanir put his hand over his eyes. "Is this better?" asked the voice. "At least, since you are a Scarlet mage, it is the figure you are more used to."

Hanir lowered his hand. A salamander coiled before him, lashing its tail, body made of

coruscating red and gold flames within a general lizard shape. He had heard that some Scarlet mages could command them, and he had seen figures in books, but never faced a lord of his element before. He started to bow and then caught himself. This wasn't really a salamander. It was a…a Person of the Blending.

"Why did you bring me here?" he asked. "And where is Lightflower?"

"Who is Lightflower?" the salamander countered. A tongue like white fire traveled past its lips, and Hanir blinked as the blinding inside of its mouth was revealed. Then it had closed its mouth again and was looking with what seemed to be complete innocence at him.

"The Doralissan Prince who traveled with me," said Hanir.

"He is dead."

Hanir stared. The words rocked him in a way that he had not thought anything could. "A Destined prince doesn't die until his Destiny wills it," he said at last, when he had his voice back.

"Oh, I see," said the salamander. "The old conceptions still prevail in Orlath. I knew that, but I had not thought that particular pernicious thought survived. Destiny safeguards, my prince, but only as long as it continues to exist."

"Nothing can destroy Destiny."

"We can," said the salamander calmly. "We are outside the Cycle, having mastered it, and something that is outside the Cycle can do as it pleases with Destiny. We have mastered the ancient art of taking Destiny and doing as we will with it. In Lightflower's case, we took his Destiny, since he kept insisting that it told him to kill us all. We thought it would make him more reasonable. Instead, he killed himself."

Hanir stared at his hands and was silent.

"You won't try to do that, will you?" added the salamander. "We have need of you to carry a message to the world above."

His mind still trying to grapple with Lightflower's death, Hanir fell back on old and trusted thoughts. "I won't do anything to betray Orlath or the blood of Queen Aneron." He wouldn't have wanted Lightflower dead. He had thought the man was ridiculous and had become more and more certain that he wasn't worthy of Emmy, but he would never have wished the Prince of Doralissa dead.

"Carrying a message won't betray either," said the salamander patiently. "We want you to carry a message of peace."

"From you to the surface world?" Hanir had heard of this before in the histories. When the light elves finally emerged from hiding, after Queen Aneron had confined their dark kin in another world, they had contacted the Prince Sorrasonde of Doralissa and asked her to tell the other races that they came in peace.

"No. Between the Dark and the Light. Yet another war is rising. We tried to intervene in the last one, but we were foiled. Queen Annilda's Destiny was too strong for one of our agents to remove unless he touched her, and we could not move an agent that close in time. This time, though, the war will be horrible and last for years, and we want to stop that, if we can."

"Why?"

"Why?" the salamander echoed in amazement. "Don't you care about the lives of your people? Do you really want to see them suffer as they will do if this war continues? Already Corlinth and Ozue have been attacked and all but destroyed, and both sides are burning villages on the Corlirin Plains."

If anything could snap Hanir out of his contemplating Lightflower's death, it was that. "My mother would never do such a thing."

"She would if a Dark agent had whispered rumors that the villages harbored Darkworkers," said the salamander grimly.

"Who?"

The salamander lashed its tail. "You will go rushing off to the castle and try to stop the Dark agent, won't you?" it asked. "You won't carry the message that we ask you to."

"Some things are more important."

The salamander seemed to sigh, or at least it flicked its tongue in and out of its mouth a few times and uttered a little jet of flame. "If that is really the way you feel, we can't stop you," it said. "But we would have hoped for more sense in a descendant of Queen Aneron."

"She would never have helped you, either."

"She went to found the Kingdom of Orlath partially on our advice," said the salamander. Its shape was wavering, and the flames were springing up to greater and greater heights, until it appeared as one just one bright smear of the elemental Scarlet. "We told her that there was a need for a fifth kingdom, one that could counter the excesses of the other four. We honestly believed that her kingdom would not be a battleground for Dark and Light in the way the others are. We thought she would stop fighting useless battles. But she imprisoned the elves who didn't agree with her and spread lies about the dragons, and she ignored our advice. She was too much of the Light, when all was said and done."

"What will you do with me?" asked Hanir.

"You will return to the surface. We will just have to find another agent, someone we can trust."

The world went dark then, and as much as Hanir shouted, he couldn't make the light come back. He felt for a moment as if he were standing in the center of a vast wheel; at least, it seemed that he could feel the stone turning beneath his feet. Then it stopped. A red doorway opened ahead of him.

Hanir stumbled forward. The doorway snapped shut behind him, and he found himself staring at the faces of the soldiers who had followed him and Lightflower into the mountains, and been left behind—was it only a day ago? It seemed so, since the sun was just rising.

But then one of the nobles leaped to his feet and said, all but weeping, "My lord, you have been gone three days!"

Three days.

Hanir clenched his fists. Three days it had taken him, but less than half an hour to find the world all changed. Creatures that could take away Destinies were circling to stop the grand war between Dark and Light, and they were looking for an agent.

And the Prince of Doralissa was dead.

"We did not find my sister," he said tightly.

"And Prince Lightflower?" asked one of the attendants in a Doralissan accent.

Hanir turned to him. "Is dead."

The man sank to his knees, weeping. Others drew their swords and swore a vow of vengeance for Lightflower. Hanir turned his head to look up into the mountains, his heart hardening as he saw a blue dragon riding high above with lazy flaps of its wings.

He would make the Dark pay and pay. And the People of the Blending, too—assuming they were not actually allied with the Dark.

Yes, they had to have been allied with the Dark and trying to confuse him. Why would anyone else want to stop the war between Dark and Light and let the Dark conquer the world?

Chapter Forty-Two
Training

"One can successfully train another person to do anything, if only enough time is spent on it. The corollary, of course, is that few people are willing to spend that much time."
—Galden Ferent, developer of noble education in the Kingdom of Orlath.

"Now. Call another ball of clay."

Pheron sighed. Jienna had let him eat, that was true enough, and relieve himself when the need grew overwhelming, but otherwise he had done nothing but call balls of clay for nine hours. Jienna was sure that there was something special about them, something she would discover if she could just think of a new test. She had thrown them, smashed them, made a little pot out of several of them, and told him to call them upside down and in the air, not that this made any difference. Pheron would actually have been glad to escape to an hour of sword-training with Seros. At least that didn't demand things of him that he knew he couldn't do.

Jienna did constantly.

Currently, she was demanding that he answer her questions about why he had the kind of magic that he did.

"You must have some idea," she said intensely to him. They were still in the morning room, but the curtains had been drawn across the windows, and now the light that sparkled in the mirrors was that of lamps. Jienna's face still managed to collect shifting shadows, though. "When was the first time that you realized you were different from your brothers and sister?"

"Too young for me to remember." Pheron yawned and rubbed his eyes with his hand. The smoke, or something in the lamp tallow, made his eyes burn and sting.

Jienna snorted, as if to say she didn't believe that. "Then try to remember, and tell me."

Pheron half-closed his eyes, hoping that would help with the stinging, and obediently concentrated. No memory of it would return to him from before he was five years old, though, and at last he decided to tell her that one, hoping Jienna would be content.

"I was playing with a clay ball when I was five and thinking that it was fine magic, even if not as impressive as Emmeldra's and Hanir's," he said. "Leroth was still too young to do much with his Gust magic. I could at least have one toy that was my own.

"My mother came and watched me for a little while. While I looked up at her, she shook her head and walked away. She'd done that before, and I never understood why. This time, I decided to run after her and make her tell me. I grabbed onto her gown and refused to let go.

"My mother told me that she thought I just wasn't trying hard enough, that I was capable of greater magic but didn't want to do it. She took me to a priestess of Elle and had me go through all the magic I knew in front of her, which consisted of calling a clay ball. I think the priestess knew there wasn't any greater magic hiding inside me, but she said what my mother wanted to hear-that I had potential I refused to tap.

"That was when I realized just how disappointed my mother was in me. And that was the main difference between me and my brothers and sister. She was always so proud of them.

Everything they did was cause for praise. Even Leroth tottering around and mangling words he didn't really understand was great. But I wasn't."

"I'm sorry."

Pheron started and came back to himself. The memory was one he hadn't visited for a long time, and he was afraid that there had been anger or bitterness in his voice. "You don't need to be," he said. "I thought as I grew up that it was fine. At least I wouldn't have to sacrifice my life for Orlath the way that Emmeldra and Leroth might have to do. I wouldn't have to rule and spend hours talking to nobles. I wouldn't have the Dark interested in me or trying to hunt me down like a rabbit."

"Save that you do." Jienna leaned forward and stared into his eyes. "Do you know why the Dark is so interested in you?"

"Are you really going to tell me now? Or is it time for another mysterious smile and shake of the head?"

Jienna's face turned white around the nostrils. "Did you never think that such bad manners might prevent you from ever learning the truth?"

"You're perfectly capable of making me beg to hear what it is, and then keeping it from me anyway," said Pheron. "Always assuming there is a grand purpose, and you didn't just bring me here to serve as entertainment."

"How dare you," said Jienna, and he saw that she was shaking. "Some of us are committed to winning the war with the Light."

Pheron found himself relaxing for the first time all day. This was familiar ground. He had heard the same sentiments expressed countless times, though from the other side. "I'm sure that you're committed," he said. "You're so committed that you don't care about courtesy or honesty, even though you demand it from other people. Forgive me if I don't find that very credible. Does winning a war really include being as rude as possible?"

Jienna turned away from him. "There are very good reasons why I can't tell you everything I know."

"And there are very good reasons I can't tell you why I can only call clay balls." Pheron stretched his arm above his head and tucked his stump in close to his side. That was becoming second nature. "The main reason is that I don't know."

Jienna made a sharp movement with one hand. "Haljen!" she yelled.

Haljen appeared so suddenly that Pheron blinked. Had he been listening outside the door?

"Escort Prince Pheron to his room and present him with his first lesson in Doralissan," said Jienna, her voice shaking with anger. "I think it's time that he began to study the languages he should already have known."

Pheron shook his head as he followed Haljen out of the morning room. Jienna stood with her back turned, but he could see her face in one of the mirrors. It was still white and pinched with anger. Was it really that easy to get her so angry?

If so, she reminded him strongly of both his mother and Hanir. Emmeldra would ignore him, haughty and aloof as she had taught herself to be, and Leroth would dissolve into tears at the slightest sign of opposition, but Queen Annilda and Prince Hanir had tempers. Pheron wondered if Jienna still entertained some idea of wedding Hanir, as it had seemed when she wore her kitchen maid disguise. They would be a better match than he thought either realized.

He wasn't sure whom he would feel sorrier for, though.

Haljen said something that Pheron couldn't hear. Pheron turned forward and stepped up beside the servant, crashing into someone coming the opposite way as he did so.

"Pardon me," he said, stepping back.

It wasn't Seros or one of Jienna's servants. This was a woman who was a Darkworker, at least from the fine cut of her clothes and the many black-jeweled rings she wore. She looked to be perhaps Emmeldra's age. She gave Pheron a piercing glance from gold-flecked blue eyes. Pheron wrinkled his nose. Destiny played all around her like crackling lightning, not the strongest aura he'd ever seen but definitely the most active.

"Who are you?" she asked, her voice bearing a trace of the sliding Doralissan accent.

"Prince Pheron of Orlath," said Haljen before Pheron could respond. "One of Jienna's other students. We think Pheron is the first Clay mage we've found. Pheron, this is Rangeforest. She's a Lightning mage."

"Gust and Scarlet?" asked Pheron, remembering the place the lightning bolt had held in Jienna's unusual depiction of the Cycle.

Rangeforest's face had cleared of its haughty sneer, and she was examining him with intense interest, not unlike a priestess of Elle might look over a sacrifice. "And you're Crop and Azure," she murmured. "Can I see?" She raised a hand, and a bolt of lightning dramatically flung itself from her palm and cracked into the opposite wall, where it caused a blackened hole.

Dust drifted down, and Jienna's voice shouted, "Rangeforest, no shooting outside the classroom! I told you that!"

Pheron shrugged, suspecting he was about to disappoint yet another Darkworker, and called his clay.

Rangeforest studied it with grave attention and then nodded. "Yes, I see. Congratulations." She stepped past him and continued into Jienna's morning room, her long black hair bouncing over her shoulders as if it, like her aura, had a life of its own.

Pheron stared after her, then looked at Haljen. "What did she mean, congratulations?"

The man shrugged, looking uncomfortable, then stopped as his scars pulled at him with a visible flinch. "You know Darkworkers," he said. "They'll say whatever they think sounds dramatic at the moment, anything to get you wondering."

"Darkworkers? You speak as if you weren't one of them yourself."

Haljen's face closed. "The Lady Jienna gave me orders, and I neglected them shamefully to introduce you to Rangeforest," he muttered, climbing the stairs. "I do think that she might have me beaten even worse than usual for that."

"You're beaten?"

Pheron distinctly heard Haljen curse beneath his breath. He smiled a little, but anxiously, as he hurried after the servant. Haljen was worse at keeping secrets than Jienna, and it seemed there was much that Pheron might learn from him. But if Haljen was beaten, then that was something that had to stop.

"How often are you beaten?" he asked.

"My lord, I don't wish to talk about it."

Pheron reached out and lightly touched his shoulder with the stump, wanting to make certain he wouldn't land on top of one of the scars and distress Haljen further. "Please. If you are my servant, and there are things I'm doing to cause you beatings, I want to know."

"Why?" Haljen turned and stood up straight for once, so that he met Pheron's eyes squarely. "So you can do it yourself?"

"No," said Pheron, confused as to where the man could have drawn that conclusion from. "So I can put a stop to it."

Haljen only stood there looking at him. Pheron glanced up and down the stair but saw

no one coming and no obvious peepholes that Jienna could have installed for the purpose of watching them. "Please," he said quietly. "Is there something I can do to stop them?"

"No," said Haljen at last, in a voice as ancient as dust. Still, his eyes continued to lock on Pheron's with something like gratitude in them. "She beats me for infractions committed a long time ago, when I dared to rebel against her. There was a time—well, I don't suppose it matters that you learn of it. There was a time when I didn't see that my best advantage lay with the Dark. The Light hates me, and I hate it, and I served Jienna willingly, but there were things I wouldn't do. She made me see that my life would be better—easier—if I did them. But she's never quite forgiven me for telling her no at first."

Pheron's eyes went to the twisting scars. "With torture?"

"Pardon, my lord?"

"She convinced you with torture?"

"Yes, my lord."

Pheron nodded. He couldn't name the emotion that was rising in him yet, though certainly part of it was fear. If Jienna didn't take refusal well, what might she do to him if he continued to tell her he didn't know anything about why he had his magic and she didn't believe him? But most of the new emotion was focused on Haljen. "Is there some way that you can convince her you need to stay by my side all the time?"

"I don't see how. You're hardly helpless."

Pheron caught his breath. *I certainly didn't think there was a time when I would be blessing Leroth.* He twisted to the side and held up his stump.

Haljen shook his head. "You can—"

"Not even put on my clothes by myself," said Pheron. "And certainly not take them off. And I noticed that some of the food would require two hands to eat. And it's a book that she wants me to learn the Doralissan lesson from, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Haljen, still staring at him.

"A thick one?"

"Yes. Hard to open, too."

Pheron smiled. "Do you think I can hold the book open with just one hand and a stump? It's not a very long stump. It's cut off just below my elbow, look. I think that I'll need some help. And if Jienna really does object, then I'll think of something else."

"Why would you do this?"

"I don't like to see anyone hurt," said Pheron.

"She wouldn't make you watch." Haljen hesitated and then added, "At least, I don't think that she would make you watch."

"But I would know it was happening."

They stood there for a moment looking into each other's eyes. Then Haljen cleared his throat and looked away with difficulty. "Come with me, my lord," he said. "You should get started on your Doralissan lesson, and then I'll make up a fire and fill a tub with water for you."

Pheron followed him, smiling.

* * *

Pheron opened his eyes later that night and glanced around suspiciously, with the odd feeling that he hadn't quite awakened from a dream. But there was Haljen, asleep on the floor, with the large book of Doralissan next to him. The hours of lessons hadn't been a dream, and

neither had the servant's expression when at last he went to sleep on the floor, having heard that Jienna would spare him to the service of Prince Pheron for as long as he was needed.

The banked glow of the fire wasn't a dream, either, or the ache in his muscles.

The banked glow of the fire…

It glowed brighter as Pheron watched, and then something stretched lazily out of the hearth and towards him.

Pheron started to fling himself out of bed, thinking that an ember was setting the furnishings on fire, but then stopped as he realized the flames had a definition shape, almost like a snake's. Moreover, they weren't setting anything on fire. They coiled on the foot of his bed and looked up at him with glowing golden eyes.

"Greetings," it said.

"Who are you?" asked Pheron, though he didn't know if that was the most appropriate question or not. Perhaps it ought to have a "what" somewhere in it.

"A messenger," said the thing. "There are people who would be interested in speaking to you."

"Agents of the Dark or the Light?" Pheron asked suspiciously.

"Neither. Quite outside both."

Pheron considered that. Then he said, "What do I have to do?"

"Be here at midnight tomorrow in front of the hearth and say that you wish to speak with the fire. We will hear you." The serpent turned and slithered back into the flames, losing its shape among them, before Pheron could ask any more questions.

Pheron sat there, blinking, for a moment, and then shook his head. Definitely a dream.

There would, of course, be no harm in sitting before the fire tomorrow and speaking the phrase. Just to prove to himself that, definitely, nothing was going to happen.

Chapter Forty-Three
Training the Draconic Mind

"Work ever for the redemption of the Dark races. Remember that there may be some who would turn to the side of the Light, if only the right Destined person came along and spoke the sweet words in their ears. There have been elves who fell to their knees crying out as the glory of the Light flooded them. In fact, some have said that the whole of the elven race was corrupted before Queen Aneron arrived in Orlath, and that she shut away only those utterly beyond redemption. The elves of the Light, as we know them, owe their existence to this great Queen.

"Might not even the goblins, or the dragons, someday find redemption the same way?"

—Yillos Goldfleet.

"And your mother wouldn't like that?"

Emmeldra shook her head. "No. She wants the Light to win completely or the Dark to win completely. No half-settled wars."

"I can respect that." Cloudshadow tilted her head to the side, flicking her tail. "After all,

there is no honor in leaving your enemy half-alive or in maiming one." Her eyes shone with that violent gold glow Emmeldra had become so used to, and she tore at the ground with her talons again. "Nor in smashing your fist through your enemy's eyes. When I find Pheron…"

She turned her head to look again at the wooden torture device, which hadn't been out of view since the day she first summoned it. Emmeldra hid a shudder as her student looked at it but then beamed politely as Cloudshadow looked at her. She was training the Dragon Queen, slowly, to think in terms of the Cycle and Destiny, and she had to start with small things first. She could convince her to give up torture later.

"I am sure that my mother will be more than happy to give my brother to you in payment for the things he has done," she said. "After all, he means little to the royal line of Orlath."

Cloudshadow's tail twitched once. "Good."

Emmeldra looked down and gave a pretend grave nod, all the while inwardly smiling. She had trained Cloudshadow well. Once, Cloudshadow would have disputed the need to accept anything from the Queen of Orlath. After all, she had sent her dragons to just take Pheron. Her threats had been quieter since the declaration of this strange *Grellan Ashen*, of course, but it meant something, that she was now thinking of accepting something from Queen Annilda, treating with her as an equal.

If Emmeldra could not bring the Dragon Queen to an understanding of the Light, she meant to bring her to at least an understanding of the Cycle.

"But I don't understand one thing," said Cloudshadow suddenly.

"What is that, Kezeyitilintha?" Days of practice meant that Emmeldra could finally pronounce the Dragon Queen's true title.

"Why do the nobles obey Queen Annilda?" Cloudshadow tilted her head to the side and let her tongue protrude from her jaws. "The dragons obey me because I proved my right to rule in the arena, but I have seen Queen Annilda, and I know that there are some in the kingdom who are physically stronger than she and have stronger magic. So why do they obey her?"

Emmeldra drew a small, satisfied breath. She had been waiting, hoping the dragon would bring this up. She had thought of introducing the subject herself, but it would look strange to shoehorn it into a discussion that had nothing to do with it at all, and she wasn't sure how Cloudshadow would react to it at any rate.

"The nobles obey her because of who she is," said Emmeldra.

"Who?"

"Yes. She is a descendant of Queen Aneron, and someone who is of the blood of Aneron always rules in Orlath."

"Yes, I knew that." Cloudshadow scraped her talons on the floor again, her eyes straying to the torture device. Emmeldra waited patiently. Sometimes the dragon just had to exercise her barbaric instincts and glance that way. Emmeldra could wait. She always looked back in the end and learned a little more of the Cycle and the Destiny. "But why should it matter who your ancestor was?"

"Queen Aneron founded Orlath," Emmeldra explained. "She accomplished great deeds, such as winning the most terrible war against the Dark we have yet seen. The nobles honor us because they think that we carry on her legacy. We will do great deeds, too."

"But you are not her."

"No. But the continuity of blood is stable."

"Not as stable as the continuity of virtue, it seems to me." Cloudshadow shifted, opening her wings and closing them. "My successor will be the dragon who defeats me, male or female,

bound to me by blood or not. She will be the best dragon to rule."

"And those are bloody contests, aren't they?" asked Emmeldra.

"Well—yes."

"Where many dragons die?"

"Sometimes. Not always. Sometimes there are a limited number of challengers for the position. But when several dragons want to claim it at once, then yes, it can be bloody."

"The transition of the throne is not bloody," said Emmeldra.

"I have heard of what you call civil war," said Cloudshadow quickly, as if scoring a point.

"Rare," said Emmeldra. "There has been one in Orlathian history, and in time the true heir won out, as must always happen."

"Why?"

"Destiny favors the kingdom of Orlath and the bloodline of Queen Aneron, Kezeyitilintha, to the point where betraying one of them is always punished. It makes for a secure and comfortable existence. Even in the worst times, we know that the Cycle will turn again and that soon there will be a new day and the right ruler on the throne."

Cloudshadow was silent for a moment. Emmeldra looked up at her and found that her eyes were far away, staring at the wall of the dark blue prison-cave as if she could see beyond it. Emmeldra hugged her arms round her knees and returned to her patient waiting.

"But surely that doesn't work for races other than humans," said Cloudshadow at last, as if arguing with herself.

"Elves have royalty too," said Emmeldra. "And unicorns. And so do many others allied with the Light. It is the best thing that one can do. It is in obedience to the Cycle and Destiny, and whatever is done in obedience to those two things is always right."

She saw at once that she had gone too far. Cloudshadow still had her accursed pride. She gave Emmeldra a sharp glance and said, "I think that dragons, being outside Destiny, know that some of us have a choice about obeying it or not."

Emmeldra took a deep breath and asked a daring question. Cloudshadow still sometimes got upset at her for asking anything. "Why are you outside it, my Queen?"

"What do you mean?"

"Did you commit a great sin against the Cycle and Destiny, and that is the reason you are outside them? I could think of no other reason they would choose not to acknowledge you. The goddess Elle gives Destiny to everyone, even the lowest-born of humans."

"We do not worship Elle."

Emmeldra marked another task down on her mental list of ways to change draconic thinking.

"And we committed no sin," said Cloudshadow, a thorn falling from her mouth to the cave floor. "We would know if we had. We were born this way, into a Destinyless world, and that is all there is. There is nothing anyone can do about it."

"If you ask the Cycle and Destiny, they might let you in."

Cloudshadow glared at her and unhinged her wings. "I am going to watch for Bloodsinger. He should not be taking so long." She lifted past Emmeldra and flew out through the ceiling, the dark blue parting around her in a wave of magic that Emmeldra still couldn't understand.

The Princess of Orlath sat back, smiling, and hugged her knees. Who said that one could do nothing but languish and wait for rescue while a captive of the dragons? Of course, what she was doing probably wasn't as flashy as whatever it was that her Prince Lightflower was doing to rescue her, but wouldn't it be something to manage the conversion of the dragons to the Light?

She'd have to emphasize that a sin against the Cycle and Destiny was still a sin, even if unremembered, even if ancient. Cloudshadow had to understand that, or she would never understand the essence of the Cycle. One had to submit and trust, and everything followed from that.

A breeze stirred her hair, and she turned her head in surprise, wondering for a moment if another hole had opened and another dragon entered. She rarely felt moving air in the prison-cave otherwise.

A gust of wind blew through her hair and curved back, and then it formed before her into something that Emmeldra thought was an invisible creature finally coming out. It looked like a fairy, with delicate wings and a pale body that filled in more and more, until she realized that it was drawing substance from the Gust itself, rather than becoming visible. She was almost sure that it was a sylph, an air elemental.

"Leroth?" she said aloud. She didn't know any other Gust mages who might have come to her rescue. She had rather expected the far wall to burst open in a dramatic flare of Scarlet and the dragons to roar in fury and fear and take to the skies when Lightflower came.

Come to think of it, not even Leroth could control sylphs.

"No."

The voice was bright and strong, filled with a sound of bells. Emmeldra looked back and found the creature was complete now, a tiny, winged, fair woman with long silver hair and eyes the color of a cloudless sky, staring deeply into her own.

"Who are you, then?" Emmeldra asked.

"A representative," said the sylph. "I come from a race that seeks only peace."

"Peace?" asked Emmeldra. "You want to come to the Light?" She wasn't sure if sylphs were of the Dark or Light, now that she thought about it. The lore of the elemental attendants was little-studied now, since there were so few mages who could control them and even fewer who tried.

"No," said the sylph, and the silver bells sounded impatient. "We seek peace between the Light and the Dark. The war that is coming will be as terrible as, or more terrible than, the war in Queen Aneron's time. And it took Orlath and the other kingdoms a century to rebuild after that. We are sick of the blood and the dying, which is hardly ever paid by the great lords and ladies whose Destiny starts these things. We want peace."

Emmeldra drew back, revolted. "And let the Dark win?"

"We are seeking reasonable people to be our messengers," said the sylph. "You would be a good choice, since you're of the blood of Queen Aneron and people would listen to you. Your brother Hanir rejected our message. Will you listen to us?"

"No, of course not!"

The sylph danced in place—Emmeldra was not sure what the gesture was supposed to mean—and then said, "As you will."

Emmeldra blinked and put a hand to her face, staring at the fading image. She must be tired, to be dreaming of sylphs. And it had said…it had said…

To her annoyance, for the first time in her life, Emmeldra found that she had failed to remember a prophetic dream.

Chapter Forty-Four
Truths

"Most people would rather know a pleasant truth than a harsh one. I must confess that that isn't something I can understand."
—Klessa of the Nine Wonders.

Pheron winced in spite of himself as something crashed against the wall of Jienna's morning room. "Should we really go in there?" he asked Haljen.

The other man didn't look happy about it either, but he squared his shoulders and stood taller. "We have to, my lord," he said. "Jienna really would beat me if she thought I wasn't bringing you in on purpose." He knocked on the door and had barely stepped back when a lightning bolt passed through just above his head, scorching the opposite wall.

Jienna pulled the door open. "Pheron," she said curtly. "You're on time for once. Good. Rangeforest was just leaving."

"You can't afford not to consider my theory," said Rangeforest's voice from beyond her, and Pheron was startled to hear it. She hadn't raised her voice, any more than Jienna did, but it was still the angriest voice he had ever heard. Perhaps it was the sheer edge to the words, which made them sharp enough to cut through the stone by themselves. "You probably believe that it's true, in fact. You're just afraid of the implications. I've never known you to act like this when you weren't afraid."

"Rangeforest." Jienna's voice balanced on the edge of an explosion.

"Let me stay."

"What are you arguing about?" asked Pheron before the explosion could come. If nothing else, he didn't want Jienna in a foul temper when she was testing him. He'd gotten enough of that yesterday, as Jienna seemed to become convinced that he was holding back on his knowledge about his magic just in order to irritate her. "Is it something I can help?"

Rangeforest's face appeared over Jienna's face. "She doesn't want to admit I'm right about your magic," she said.

"It's not that," said Jienna.

"It is," said Rangeforest.

Jienna started to turn on her, one hand glowing with Azure, but Pheron intervened. "What was it that you said about my magic?"

Rangeforest's eyes fixed on him, the gold flecks glowing in the blue like many suns in a high cloudless sky. "I told Jienna that your magic doesn't have any particular reason. I can't feel a Destiny behind it propelling it."

"You knew I had no Destiny," said Pheron to Jienna. "I can't think of any reason that you would find this particularly threatening."

"But it must have a reason," said Jienna, her arms crossed over her chest. "There must be a reason that you have magic such as you do. Some insult to the line of Aneron…some way that Destiny intends to get around its prescriptions and counter its own excesses…something. Instead, Rangeforest is saying that it doesn't have a reason, and it's just something that happened."

Pheron blinked, his heart opening to unexpected ideas. "In the same way that stone is hard?" he asked. "There is no reason for it to be beyond itself? No great reason for a stone to be hard that was ordained by the Cycle, or Destiny, or Elle?"

"Yes, exactly," said Rangeforest and nodded to him. "You grasp it quickly. Jienna still doesn't seem to understand it completely."

"But *nothing* is outside the Cycle," said Jienna.

Pheron laughed in spite of himself. At Jienna's darting glance, he elaborated, "You sound just like my brother Leroth."

"I am not like him," said Jienna, with a viciousness that Pheron couldn't understand—unless, as Rangeforest said, it was prompted by fear. She turned back to Rangeforest. "The dragons have no Destiny either, and yet they can interact with the Cycle, and surely there is a reason that Cloudshadow is their Queen now, in the time of this invocation of the *Grellan Ashen*."

"I agree with you," said Rangeforest, her own arms folded now. "But the dragons have chosen to involve themselves with Destiny. They have had long years to ponder it, and they have come into the war on the side of the Dark. But, unless you think that all newborn children can choose their Destiny and their magic, I don't think my Lord Pheron chose to be born with no Destiny and only enough magic to call a ball of clay. And he hasn't chosen either Light or Dark yet, have you, my lord?" Her glance came back to Pheron, sharp as sunlight.

"No," said Pheron. "My kin are not exactly sterling examples of the Light, and the arguments the Dark uses have so far been unconvincing."

"There must be some reason he's here," said Jienna desperately. "Some way that the Dark can use him against the Light. Destiny was granted dominion over the line of Queen Aneron forever, and it has failed. There must be some reason for that."

"Possibly," said Rangeforest. "But that reason need not have anything to do with Destiny, and it may not be something you can hold."

Jienna said sharply, "No lessons for today, Pheron. I need to consider this," and then swept out the other door they had used the day before, the one that led to the feasting room.

Pheron blinked, then looked at Haljen. The other man only shook his head silently, having no advice to offer. Pheron turned back to Rangeforest, to see her holding her arm out and smiling at him.

"You're interesting," she said. "I'd like to talk to you. And you haven't had breakfast yet, have you?"

Pheron could only shake his own head and lay his hand on her arm.

"There's another room where my fine lady keeps her food, and if you don't object to eating raw cheese and bread, it's quite well-stocked." Rangeforest glanced at Haljen. "You should go and keep your mistress company. It's probably distressing to her, all alone with the knowledge I've given her clanging around in her head."

Haljen tensed. Pheron didn't think he would have seen it if he hadn't been looking for it, but there it was. Even as Haljen turned away, he said, "No."

Rangeforest raised a brow. "I daresay you have good reason for doing this, my lord, so I will speak plainly. There are things I should tell you that his ears shouldn't hear."

"No," said Pheron. "Jienna has him beaten when she gets angry, and this is probably one of those times." A glance at Haljen confirmed it. "And I don't want him separated from me. I've managed to protect him for one night, but it's a fragile protection that could evaporate if Jienna gets reminded of his existence."

"He shouldn't hear this," said Rangeforest simply. "He'll tell his lady."

"No, he won't."

"You don't know who he is, do you?"

"An unwilling Darkworker." Pheron met Rangeforest's eyes and held them, even when it seemed as if she would like to look back at Haljen again. "Who was tortured by Jienna until he gave in and joined her side. Someone who might be me."

Rangeforest's face softened after a moment. "Then you must ask him whether he will repeat what he hears and see what he says."

Pheron looked back at Haljen. "Well?"

"No."

"You swear it?" asked Rangeforest. She dropped Pheron's hand and stepped forward, one hand toying with the black rings on the other. "You know what will happen if you swear to something in front of me and you don't really mean it."

Haljen swallowed. "I know," he said. "But I won't repeat what you say to my Lord Pheron. He was kind to me, as far as he could be given the limited state of his knowledge." Pheron blinked and wondered what that meant but decided not to interrupt. "I will keep your words locked in my breast."

Slowly, Rangeforest lifted her hand from the ring. "If you have lied to me…"

"I wouldn't, my lady. Not to you." There was a strange wistfulness in Haljen's face as he looked at Rangeforest. Pheron asked the question before he could stop it.

"Are you related?"

Haljen glanced up, startled. Rangeforest began to laugh, so hard that she nearly spilled herself to the ground. "No," she gasped at last when she could speak. "Oh, what a question to ask! We are fellow Darkworkers, and he has dealt with me before, and he has seen what happened when someone betrayed a confidence they had sworn in the presence of my rings. That's all."

"The way that he looked at you…"

Rangeforest laughed again, then looked at Haljen and spoke in the sliding, liquid tongue that Pheron knew was Doralissan. He concentrated, and thought he picked out one word from the flow, *ildan*. He clung to that word, determined to find out what it meant.

Haljen bowed his head.

Rangeforest shook back her hair and took Pheron's hand again. "This I will tell you," she said, as they proceeded across the Great Hall and to yet another door that had been hidden by a tapestry. "Haljen won't betray me, but neither should you."

"I won't," said Pheron. "I'm in enough trouble already."

Rangeforest smiled and guided him into the larder.

* * *

Almost midnight.

Pheron sat blinking on his bed, facing the fire in the hearth, and wondered at the strange words that Rangeforest had spoken to him.

Amid much chatter about how powerful the Dark was growing and how they would soon strangle the Light, she had looked directly at him, and said, "Arvenna."

"What?" Pheron recognized the name of one of the northern kingdoms but had no idea what Rangeforest could mean by it. Arvenna had become insular in the last decade or so, and

there were many rumors in Orlath that it had already fallen to the Dark.

"Arvenna," repeated Rangeforest, her gold flecks once again glowing like suns. "Remember that name and hold it close to your breast, if ever you need it." She smiled. "Did you know that *arven* meant 'safety or refuge' in the old language of Doralissa?"

And then she was off again, on another seemingly senseless flow of chatter that Pheron could neither keep up with nor connect. Then she had interrupted herself again and subjected him to the same direct stare before she had said:

"If I am right, more of them than Jienna will fear you. And do you know why?"

"No," said Pheron. "I have no idea what I could do that gives them cause for fear."

"What you are, not what you do," said Rangeforest. "They will fear being blindsided. They can't see you coming, and that will frighten them."

"What do you mean?"

Rangeforest picked up a piece of white cheese that looked like the cheese Pheron had eaten at the Conclave of Darkworkers in Corlinth and said, "Don't you think the taste on this one is the tiniest bit sharp? A little out of keeping with the wine usually served with it, I think. Of course, we use a different wine in Doralissa, and we don't use the same kind of cheese at all."

And more of that, but no more of the other.

Pheron picked up the book of Doralissan lessons that Haljen had left lying on the floor and flipped idly through it, keeping an eye on the fire. He knew, of course, that the printed words hadn't changed. He had looked earlier, and the word *ildan* was nowhere in there that he could find.

But he was good at being stubborn, and he could wait. Wait to find out what it meant, wait until he could find someone who told him what it meant…

"I would like to speak with the fire," he said, staring directly into the flames.

Nothing happened, and he had just started to relax when a snake formed out of them and crawled across the floor towards him. Pheron let out his breath slowly. No possibility that he was dreaming, not this time. He was tired, but he hadn't been asleep.

"Thank you," said the snake, coiling around his leg. Pheron tensed, but no pain resulted. There was nothing but the faintest prickling touch of heat, in fact. "You are the only one who has responded to our message in a positive manner."

"Perhaps the others had a better idea who you are," said Pheron. "And perhaps you told them something less cryptic."

The snake flickered its tongue. "Perhaps," it said. "But you can call us the People of the Blending, if you like. We are outside Dark and Light, and we would like to stop this war."

"Which one?"

"The war between Dark and Light."

Pheron blinked for a few moments. He had never heard someone speak of such a thing. The war between Dark and Light was to be fought, between the Dark and all the kingdoms, and won for a generation, so that there could be twenty-five or thirty years of Light, and then war again…

It did seem rather a waste of time, when he thought about it that way.

"Why are you outside Dark and Light?" he asked. "Do you see them as wastes of time?"

"Something like that," said the snake and flicked its tongue again. Pheron was beginning to take that as a gesture of amusement. "But mainly it is simply our nature. It may be hard for you to understand, since you are a Prince of Orlath, but we are outside Destiny."

Pheron swallowed and told his beating heart to calm itself. After all, he didn't have

anything to indicate that these People of the Blending were like him in any other way. "It's not hard for me to understand at all," he said carefully. "I have no Destiny, either."

The snake recoiled as if he had burned it, and for a moment Pheron felt an intense flash of heat. Then it examined him carefully, and Pheron heard wonder in its voice when it said, "This is true. And unforeseen."

"Will you tell me more about your people?" asked Pheron.

"Certainly. But—" Abruptly the snake coiled back on itself. The golden eyes went distant. "Something approaches," it hissed. "Something that you must run from." It uncoiled from his leg and made its way rapidly back towards the fire.

Pheron blinked. "Can't you tell me more than that?"

"We can risk no trace of our people being found here," said the snake. It glanced back at him, almost apologetically. "If you survive this, sit in front of any fire and call once again. We will hear you, and we will come to you."

"What must I do?"

"Run. There is help on the way, and doom as well."

Pheron opened his mouth to speak, and the snake slid into the flames and was gone.

Pheron sat there for a moment, shaking his head, then turned and nudged Haljen with his foot. It took the man a moment to wake, with him being such a sound sleeper. When he did start awake, Pheron said, the words flying out of his mouth before he even had time to consider them, "I have received a warning of danger to come. Will you come with me?"

Haljen nodded. "Where are we going?"

"I don't know." Pheron glanced around the room and then shook his head. There was nothing here that was his, nothing that he would take with him. "But we're going somewhere away from here." He strode to the door and flung it open.

Jienna stood there, her eyes mad and her body aglow with Azure magic. Pheron felt his heart start to pound yet again. He had a feeling that he knew what the "doom" was.

"You're too dangerous," she said, voice absurdly calm. "I have to kill you."

She raised her hand.

There came, from above him, a sharp chattering noise.

Chapter Forty-Five
Truths He Cannot Accept

"Sometimes I think the whole truth of the Cycle and Destiny could be revealed to our stunned mortal minds, and most of the people who saw it would yawn and wander away, or say, 'What?'"

—Andren Goaraten, when drunk.

Leroth stretched his muscles carefully. The elfwoman had come back, no longer laughing now, and freed him from his bonds with all due solemnity. Apparently, the King—or the elf who called himself King with no approbation from the Cycle, Leroth reminded himself—had agreed to

the duel, and also decided that his opponent should be in some condition to fight it, which meant not cramped by the ropes and chains that destroyed his circulation so effectively.

Leroth had a few hours to get ready.

After stretching his muscles and making a few passes with Acandra, he had decided to prepare in the best way he knew how, by praying to Elle. It had been long moments and the goddess still hadn't answered, but Leroth didn't stop. After all, she would take notice of him when she wished. There was nothing he could do with his puny mortal will to make her yield.

"Excuse me."

Leroth ignored the interruption and concentrated more fiercely. If it was one of those impious elves, with their mockeries of Ellian rituals, they could learn to worship the goddess properly by watching him.

"Excuse me."

Leroth could almost hear the goddess's voice in his head now, and he wasn't about to stop for anyone, even the King, who thought they had anything to say to him until he was done praying.

A splash of cold water hit him.

Leroth staggered up, gasping and blinking, and looked around. It was unlike the elves to waste water splashing him. If anything, they seemed to value it and to grudge giving it up to him, even in the extremely small portions in glass cups that they brought him.

But it wasn't an elf who was watching him, he saw, which explained a great deal. Instead, an undine lay coiled on the rocks, her hands tucked beneath her chin, watching him with blue eyes that seemed to have no emotion but irreverence behind them.

Leroth blinked. He had never seen a water elemental, though he had seen numerous pictures. And this must be an undine, with her hair like flowing water, a transparent body that coiled and shifted constantly, and those beautiful facial features. Of course, her beauty had no effect on him. He wasn't an Azure mage, who would be ensnared by one of these things in seconds, unless for some reason he was strong enough to control one.

"Why have you come to me?" asked Leroth. "I have an important duel with the Elven King—well, he calls himself King—coming up."

The undine blinked. Then she said, in a voice like gurgling water, "Did you never consider how long an elf might live?"

Leroth glared at her. "Some in my own world say they're immortal," he said. "But I know they really only live hundreds of years."

"Yes." The undine leaned closer to him. "And in that time they become very, very good with a sword."

"So?"

"So you're fighting an elven king, probably with his pride provoked, who's been training with a sword for hundreds of years." The undine spread her hands. "And you're, what, eighteen?"

"Twenty-two," growled Leroth, stung. He had always looked young for his age.

The undine nodded. "Young," she said. "Young enough not to be nearly as good with a sword as an elf. And old enough not to be so stupid. Why are you fighting him?"

"It's my Destiny."

The undine looked at him in silence for a moment. Then she said, "You are Leroth, Prince of Orlath? Son of Queen Annilda?"

"Yes."

"And you still believe this sort of thing?"

"I have a prophecy," said Leroth. "The prophecy won't let me die before it's my time."

"And if it is?"

"Then I hope to die serving Destiny and the Cycle."

The undine put her head in her hands. "They would assign me to you," she said. "To someone who believes in the Destiny he labors under with all his heart and has never thought to ask himself if it was a chain. I suppose I might as well ask, though I already know how you'll answer me." She looked back up at him. "Would you be willing to bear a message to the leaders of the Light and the Dark, asking them to put their differences aside and stop the war?"

"What? And let the Dark conquer the world? What kind of prince of Orlath would I be if I did something like that?"

As he finished, Leroth noticed that the undine was mouthing the words along with him. She nodded to him. "Thank you. Worst of luck in your duel."

She dived into the rocks and was gone, spraying him with another splash of cold water. Leroth rubbed at it in disgust. He'd never seen an undine before, but somehow he'd imagined that they were graceful and dignified, like sylphs or salamanders, not…

Not…

What? Why was he thinking about elementals, that old and outdated concept in magical theory? He had to be back at work, praying for Elle's blessing.

He went back into prayer, asking her pardon as well for allowing his mind to wander to such things for no very good reason.

* * *

"You understand the rules?"

"Yes, my lord." Technically, the elven pretender shouldn't be allowed even that title, but Leroth was determined to be courteous to his opponent.

At least the elves did have some sense of ceremony. Their Dueling Circle was in a large ring of silver trees that shone like highly polished metal. Their leaves didn't quiver and tremble in the wind that Leroth could clearly feel passing around his head, but that didn't matter. They could be metal sculptures for all that Leroth cared. The important thing was how they looked. When he gazed back on the memory of this duel in his mind, he wouldn't have to remember fighting in some crowded, leafy wood, and that was the thing that he valued the most about it.

The elven usurper even looked proper. He wore a suit of armor that gleamed white. It was made out of some kind of stone; Leroth thought it might be chalcedony. He carried a sword that was fully the equal of Acandra and shimmered with such magic that Leroth thought he might have been uneasy, if he didn't have the assurance of Destiny that he would win this duel.

He wasn't uneasy. He was floating at the center of a deep pool of calm.

The elven king raised his sword and nodded.

Leroth nodded and raised Acandra.

They sprang together.

The elf flowed and danced, and he refused to close after that initial charge. Instead, he circled Leroth like a spinning top of light, and now and then Leroth felt that silvery sword rake along his side. He shook his head and turned to face the elven king again, wondering if the man ever listened to the promptings of Destiny. If he listened, surely he would know that it was his Destiny to lose this battle.

But, of course, he didn't listen, or he would never have dared to take his throne and claim

the title he aspired to without the blessing of Elle and the Cycle.

"I hope the goddess will have mercy on your soul, when I send it to where it's going," Leroth told him and whirled closer, this time landing his first blow. The elf winced a little as Acandra struck through the elbow joint in his armor, but he didn't appear greatly hurt, and it wasn't enough to make him drop his sword. Leroth was pleased. He wouldn't want this to be over too early.

"And I hope that you can bear what I'm about to tell you," said the elf, his voice not sounding out of breath at all, the way that it should have after such jumping and spinning. "You should be pleased to see us return to the world, as we will, and overrun those who imprisoned us long ago. Elves are of the Dark, you know, kin to goblins, and not part of the Light at all. That Queen Aneron made us so is unnatural."

Leroth laughed. "I know better than to believe that. The beauty of the elves who are restored to their proper place in the Light is an inspiration to us all." He moved forward, Acandra describing circles now, trying to get at the spots under the elf's greaves.

The elf leaped aside without pause and said, "Have you ever heard our kin, whom you think of as part of the Light, sing with longing expressions on their faces?"

"Of course. Longing is part of being an elf."

The king nodded. "They are singing for the state of mind they remember so well, when we were innocent and cruel, simple as animals. Queen Aneron changed all that and shut away the rest of us who wouldn't change. But we will be free, and we will hunt the world again."

"You are lying." Leroth darted forward, but the king was ready for him and spun, his sword sending up a flurry of sparks as it clashed with Acandra.

"No, I am not," said the king, when they faced each other and could speak again. "We will be free and hunt the world again."

"Not that part of it," said Leroth. Given that his blood could somehow open the gate part of the way, he didn't see much point in denying that. "The part that says that the elves were ever part of the Dark and meant to be that way. Queen Aneron redeemed them."

"They were never part of the Light," said the king calmly and dodged another of Leroth's blows. "They are part of the Dark. And they know it. They can feel the Dark singing at them to come home. They go into your courts and sing their songs of longing, and believe that they are singing wistfully of remaining part of the Light against all temptation. But, in truth, they are singing of the home they just barely remember. That home is the Dark, and when we return from Dezeywandu, then we will bring them home again."

Leroth shook his head. "I can't accept that."

"That makes it no less true." The king tensed. "And there is something else that I don't think you will be able to accept, true though it is."

"What is that?"

"I have been using nothing like my full strength."

And the world seemed to explode.

A flurry of sword-blows came at him from all angles, so fast that Leroth knew he couldn't hope to keep up with them all. He stumbled back, trying to raise Acandra and failing. Then the sword went flying out of his hand, which had never happened before in a fight.

Leroth looked up at the king's silver sword and felt the sudden and deep conviction that he was going to die.

Chapter Forty-Six
Running

"Things can change in a second. In less than that. In a moment."
—Claros Laerdan of Arvenna.

Pheron looked up.

Jienna started to, but a loop of silk dropped over her neck and she grunted, straining abruptly on her toes as the thing above her tugged more firmly on the line.

Pheron shook his head. The snake had said that "help" was on the way, but he had hardly expected this.

The Damned Spider dropped from the rafter, hauling on Jienna so that her feet left the floor. It chattered at him, a sound of welcome, and then turned back to Jienna, waving its first two legs fiercely. Another loop of silk shot out and wrapped around her legs.

"What is that thing?"

Pheron turned his head and saw Haljen cowering back, his face almost green and his eyes fixed on the Spider. "The Damned Spider," said Pheron.

"Who?"

"A friend." Pheron still felt strange saying that, but he glanced back at the Spider and saw nothing to contradict it. The Spider was winding yet another loop of silk, this time about Jienna's hands to bind them more closely to her body. "Come on. We probably don't have much time before Jienna works loose or sets some of her servants on us." He turned and hurried out the door.

"I can't."

Pheron looked back, stifling his impatience. There might be some important reason that Haljen was acting like an idiot, after all. "What do you mean?"

"I'm sorry. I can't." Haljen hid his face in his hands, though the scars on his shoulders stopped him from completely covering his features. Tears of panic leaked down his face and washed over his palms. "Spiders…I can't."

"You've survived torture, and you're frightened of a spider?"

"That's not an ordinary spider!" Haljen shouted at him. Spittle flecked his lips.

"If you stay here, you'll have to face Jienna," Pheron pointed out.

The man came crawling forward, sobbing and scrabbling with his hands at the floor, as if he thought it should open up and swallow him. The Damned Spider, who had wrapped Jienna firmly in a cocoon, chattered at him, and he flinched backwards.

"Come here!" said Pheron loudly. It was the first time he had ever tried to give an order to the Damned Spider, and he wasn't sure if it would work.

The Spider chattered again and then turned and scuttled across the floor towards him. Pheron put out a careful hand and rested it on the great purple back. The Spider braced its back four legs and reared up on them, wrapping the front four around his waist. Pheron gingerly stroked its back and watched in amazement as the Spider made another chattering noise, soft and soothing, not unlike a cat's purr.

"At least stop touching the thing," whispered Haljen, creeping, flattened, along the wall.

Pheron looked at the Damned Spider in wonder, shook his head, and then gently pushed the legs off his waist. The Spider scuttled at his side as he ran down the stairs, Haljen creeping behind him. Pheron opened the door at the bottom of the stairs, hoping the Great Hall didn't hold some opportunistic servant cleaning up the food Jienna must have eaten.

It didn't, but it did hold Seros, who started to his feet when he saw them. "Pheron, I heard," he said. "It doesn't matter if your magic's ordinary, you know. You can still help us. We'll need a prince of Aneron's line to rule in Orlath when this is all done—"

"Jienna just tried to kill me," said Pheron. "I'm not staying here." Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the Spider fling a loop of silk towards the hidden ceiling and climb up it, vanishing into the darkness in seconds. He would have been fearful of abandonment, but he knew where the Spider was going.

"Things can be worked out." Seros came forward, one hand very carefully held away from his sword, the other out in front of him. "There are things you need to know, about Jienna and about him." He jerked his head at Haljen, who whimpered and seemed as afraid of Seros as he had been of the Spider. "You won't learn them if you just go running off into the night. Cloudshadow is still looking for you, you know."

"You wanted to help her."

"My priorities have changed." Seros slowed his voice and even clucked his tongue, as if speaking to a balky horse. "I understand you're frightened, Pheron, but there are things we have to discuss."

"No."

"We must!" Seros barked, his silver eyes glittering and his Destiny snapping around him. Then he calmed himself and tried to pretend that had been a fluke. Pheron, watching him warily, knew it wasn't. Seros was just like the other Darkworkers and would use Pheron if he could figure out a way to make it work. "You don't know what the *Grellan Ashen* means, do you?"

"No."

"It means that all creatures of the Dark are to bend to the will of the Dark's most powerful lieutenant in any given area," said Seros. "If we were nearer the Rashars, that would be Cloudshadow, but here it's Jienna. Everyone will help her hunt you down."

"I don't care."

"You should." Seros stopped, almost within arm's reach, and stared wistfully at Pheron. "You remind me so much of myself, and I chose the Dark. I should like to see you do the same, you know. It would vindicate a lot of what I believe in."

Pheron shook his head, though he was almost touched. Seros was a noble lord, of the Dark or not. And it was the first time Pheron could recall someone being interested in Pheron, rather than the Prince of Orlath. "I'm sorry, Seros. I can't choose something I know to be wrong."

"You'll go back to the Light, then?"

"No. I'll go off and try to live as far from the battle as I can." Pheron hesitated as he remembered the People of the Blending and the message they wanted him to carry but told himself that might never happen if he didn't at least get out of here alive. "I promise that I won't be of any use to the Light. They won't wield me as a weapon against you. But neither will I be a weapon in your hands."

"That was the wrong answer," said Seros, and he lunged, one hand drawing his sword from the sheath with startling speed.

Pheron twisted and flung a clay ball, but Seros was ready for the trick this time and didn't

slip. Once again, Pheron felt the curl of an arm around his neck and the edge of a blade resting against his throat.

"I'm sorry," Seros whispered in his ear. "But this is the way it is. I can't figure out a way to use you, but I can't get rid of the conviction that you're dangerous, either. And that means that I need to kill you before you can become a danger to the Dark. I'm so sorry. I hope you understand." Pheron thought he was actually crying as he shifted the sword and prepared to cut in.

A loop of silk closed around the sword and tugged it out of his hand.

While Seros was still staring, Pheron spun away as hard as he could and kicked Seros in the solar plexus. Seros folded up with hardly a wheeze. Pheron turned and sprinted towards the far door from the Great Hall.

Baying filled the air before he reached it.

Pheron found himself gasping. The air in his lungs seemed to have turned thin and cold, as if he stood on the heights of the Rashars. He couldn't see anything but mist out of the corners of his eyes; still, he thought the Great Hall was changing. They were flowing into some other place…

Turning his head, he saw an enormous black dog, the size of a pony, trotting across the floor of the Hall towards him. Its eyes shone like bottomless pits, and its tongue was a great, dead thing hanging between white teeth the size of Pheron's hand.

The ghioutli—for so Pheron knew it was—halted in front of him and breathed in his face. Pheron bowed his head. It smelled like despair. And the world around him warped and changed further. When it changed completely, he knew, he would be in the ghioutli's land, where it could hunt him at its leisure.

"Stop that."

The voice was strong and clear, and it ripped through the mists. Pheron saw the ghioutli turn its head and snarl, and then something bright tore through the mist and cut it down.

Pheron blinked and stood up, rubbing his brow. A face swam into being in front of him, and a powerful hand clenched on his wrist.

"Are you well?"

Pheron came fully back to himself then. Rangeforest stood in front of him, and from the smell of cooking meat, it was one of her lightning bolts that had cut the dog down. He turned his head slightly and saw the ghioutli lying dead, a smoking hole in its side.

"Why did you do that?" he asked.

Rangeforest shrugged. "The things annoy me. And I suspect that Jienna is going to want me dead, too, once she comes down the stairs, for the sake of telling her something she didn't want to hear." She looked towards the stairs, ignoring the groaning Seros as thoroughly as Pheron had ever seen someone ignored. "What did you do to her, by the way?"

Pheron looked up at the rafters and said, "Come down."

The Damned Spider descended from a loop of silk and hung in front of them, close to coming between Pheron and Rangeforest but not quite doing so.

Rangeforest blinked. "I've never seen a Deathweaver this close before," she said. "I didn't know that one would choose to associate with a human."

Pheron shrugged. "It's a friend. Will you get Haljen?" The man was still cowering in the middle of the Great Hall, though that might have to do with Rangeforest or the ghioutli as easily as with the Spider. "He's frightened of spiders, and he won't come on his own."

"He should be," said Rangeforest. "Jienna tortured him for days with Deathweaver spiders

when she was trying to convince him to join the Dark."

Pheron caught his breath and went back to get Haljen himself. "I'm sorry," he said, as he helped the man gently to his feet. "I didn't know the true source of your fears about spiders."

Haljen caught himself and shook his head. "No," he said. "It's all right. I'm all right. But where are we going?"

"I don't know," said Pheron grimly.

"You won't get far."

They turned their heads and looked at Seros, who had regained his feet but didn't look ready to come after them, not without his sword. He held his stomach and glared at them.

"The ghioutlin would not come at the call of anyone who didn't command the full force of the *Grellan Ashen*," he said. "You won't get far. They run faster than any hound ever born."

Rangeforest shrugged. "I'm game," she said and pulled open the door.

* * *

"It's no use."

Pheron, collapsed and panting, didn't answer Haljen. He knew the man was right, of course, which only made it worse.

They had been running for an hour, not resting, and the ghioutlin had been behind them. Pheron heard a bay each time he was sure that they were free, saw a running black shape each time he was sure that he had managed to leave them behind, and had seen their black eyes closer than he wanted to, several times.

"I can't keep killing them," said Rangeforest. "The Dark will never take me back if I do." She hesitated, then lowered her voice. "Besides, I'm getting too tired to both use my magic and run."

"I know," said Pheron.

The Damned Spider scuttled up to him and wrapped one leg around his waist. Pheron stroked its back and stared into the distance, hearing the bay rise again.

"Do they hunt as a pack, Rangeforest?" he asked.

"Of course," said Rangeforest. "Unless you think that the ones I killed are all the same one, rebearing itself like a phoenix over and over again."

"No," said Pheron and listened to a howl that made the air seem thin and cold. "I meant, do they hunt with one mind, or would they break up and attack different prey?"

"A pack," said Rangeforest, and there was no doubt in her voice. "You could get them to all go after one target." She paused. "Who's the target?"

"Myself," said Pheron. "They'll spend some time with me. The rest of you should have time to get away." Besides, they probably only wanted him. He doubted that Jienna cared where Rangeforest went, and she probably thought Haljen would come creeping back on his own, too broken to keep away.

"No," said Rangeforest.

"You won't have time to get away?" Pheron pretended to consider that, even though he knew what she was really objecting to. "I suppose that they might—"

"No," said Rangeforest. "I mean, what's the point? She wants you, and you're just going to yield yourself up?"

"If it will let the rest of you get away—"

"I thought you weren't part of the Light." Rangeforest's voice turned scathing. "I thought

you didn't believe in self-sacrifice and all that other nonsense."

"I don't," said Pheron, though he had to wonder if that was true. "But I'm their main target, I think, and we can't all get away." That much was true. Rangeforest ran fleetly, but Haljen didn't. "They should spend some time with me and not turn back to the hunt for you—"

A howl interrupted him, and he shivered. The ghioutlin were close.

"But you can't yield," said Rangeforest, as if talking to someone who was doing something stupid. Her eyes flamed. "That's what she wants you to do."

"So?"

"You can't do something just because someone else wants you to do it!" Rangeforest shouted.

Pheron hid a smile. He thought he saw why Jienna would have a problematic student in Rangeforest.

"Go on," he said quietly. "I'll stay here."

"And the Deathweaver?"

It took Pheron a moment to realize that she was talking about the Damned Spider. He glanced at the Spider. It leaned closer to his side.

"Stays with me, I suppose," he said. It sounded amazing, put that way, but there it was.

Rangeforest rose to her feet. "I don't know why I'm doing this," she muttered, as she slung one of Haljen's arms around her shoulders.

"Because you know I'm right. You can both return to the Dark. But both Dark and Light are hunting me."

Rangeforest stood there a moment, looking at him. Then she opened her mouth.

Whatever she might have been going to say was drowned out by the baying of ghioutlin.

She shook her head, then turned and ran.

Pheron sat where he was, his heart loud in his ears but his spirit strangely calm.

He could do this. Not because of any self-sacrifice or similarly noble and stupid idea, but because he was right. There wasn't any place left, no person or group that didn't have a grudge against him.

That could truly depress him, if he let it. Pheron pushed the thought away and watched the Corlirin grass stir as the lead ghioutli came through. It grinned at him and sauntered closer, and Pheron knew he had chosen correctly, that the legends were true. They were playful creatures, in their way, and they liked to kill by torture. He would keep them occupied for some time.

The Damned Spider hissed and reared.

Pheron put his hand on it to hold it back and watched the ghioutlin come, spreading out in a wake around him. His heart continued to pound loudly in his ears, indeed so loudly that he started frowning a little. Was he really that frightened? Or was it…

Fire swept past him, precisely aimed. The ghioutlin yelped, but the yelps were sounds of fear and had no effect as they withered in the flames.

Pheron turned his head.

The red dragon, Bloodsinger, settled to the ground with a roar of defiance, wings working with the tearing noise that Pheron had mistaken for his own heartbeat. Rangeforest and Haljen sat on his back, wearing mad grins.

Bloodsinger stared past him but seemed to see the Damned Spider and nodded slightly to it. "Climb aboard," he said in a hissing voice.

Pheron stared at him. "I wounded your Queen. Why?"

Bloodsinger turned his head and fixed on Pheron's voice. His eyes shone with such hatred that it made Pheron's face throb as if placed in fire.

"Cloudshadow let your sister smash my egg," he said. "She is no longer my Queen."

Pheron remembered what Jienna had said. *Red dragons are vengeful. And they do not forget.*

After a moment's hesitation, Pheron stepped forward and slung himself up behind Rangeforest, the Damned Spider following like a shadow.

Chapter Forty-Seven
No More Running

"Defeat has the strangest effects on a human mind, stranger even than victory. Those who taste of victory often can become power-mad fools. But those who taste of defeat often are even greater fools—and they have more chance of dying."

—Yillos Goldfleet.

"We're not going back to the castle?" It was at least the thirtieth time someone had asked Hanir that question, but he kept his temper and gave the same answer he had given all the other times.

"No."

"But—why not?" This was one of the late Prince Lightflower's Doralissan attendants, who looked as though he would happily ride all the way back south to his homeland rather than stay in the mountains. "There is much important news to report. The Prince Lightflower's death is only one of those things."

Hanir looked up at the peaks and ignored the shifting and murmuring behind him. "We came here to rescue the Princess Emmeldra," he said. "Unless you have her hidden under your cloak…" He pretended to consider, turning to look at the attendant. "Do you have her under your cloak?"

"Me? No!" bleated the man, stumbling back.

Hanir grinned, but he didn't think his eyes were any happier. "Then don't question me about what we are and are not going to do."

* * *

Hanir headed up into the mountains by the same small trail that he and Lightflower had taken six days ago, telling his people to stay behind. They looked more than happy to, and Hanir suspected he would find some desertions when he came back down. He didn't care. If they left, Queen Annilda or the King of Doralissa would be more than happy to execute them as traitors when they crept back to their respective homelands.

He had work to do. It had taken him three days to recover from his wounds and grief, but it could be put off no longer.

Dyanse had led them to this sheer cliff face, and Hanir didn't think she had been wrong, so much as mistaken. The path did lie through the cliff, but it wasn't something that could be gotten through just by touching the diamond and falling into the cavern that led to the home of the People of the Blending.

No, that couldn't possibly be true.

There had to be another way. And Hanir fully intended to find it.

He reached the cliff face and ran his hands slowly over the stone, avoiding the hunk of diamond and any protrusions that looked at all like jewels. He would find what he needed, but he doubted that it would be anything as simple as that.

While his hands searched out tiny imperfections in the stone and tugged on them or tapped Ulua, which the People of the Blending had returned with him, against the stone, his mind worked.

He had failed in the caverns. He could have saved Lightflower from the camalozan, and therefore the People of the Blending, if he had just insisted they go back. He could have knocked Lightflower over the head and dragged him. He was the stronger, especially after Lightflower had been wounded by the camalozan.

But he hadn't done it.

Why?

His sword tapped out a hollow sound, and Hanir's heart rose for a moment. But when he tugged at the rock and tapped it again, it turned out just to be an echo. There was a way through there, for something that could dig through stone, but not for a human and not for Destiny and magic. Hanir moved a step over and went back to tapping, while his mind dug furiously for the answer to his question.

Why had he been so reluctant to go back and look for another way into the dragon's lair, which he knew was the sensible choice, when Lightflower had insisted on going on?

He knew. It wasn't as though the answer were buried very deep, after all.

He had been so caught up in proving himself to Lightflower, fearing to fall into the Dark if he did the sensible thing, that he had confused sense with the Dark.

If he hadn't…

Then Lightflower would still be alive. And Hanir could be sure that he really was still part of the Light, instead of only dreadfully wanting to be.

As it was, he couldn't be sure.

Another hollow echo, but when he tapped, the stone didn't vanish with the suddenness of a Dark illusion disbelieved.

Was he part of the Dark?

Don't be ridiculous, he scolded himself. No Scarlet mage had fallen to the Dark in a hundred years.

But the Dark didn't always try frontal assaults, did it? Sometimes it was devious. Sometimes it tempted and coaxed and charmed and managed to make itself sound like the only reasonable thing to do. Or it dressed itself up in beautiful guises and seduced.

Hanir's hands stopped moving.

Jienna?

If not Jienna, surely the love that she had inspired in him. And the Dark had failed at that, but it had tempted him badly, made him think about straying from the path of fate laid down for him with Princess Joydancer. The marriage would be even more crucial now that Lightflower was dead. Only Hanir's marriage with Joydancer could tie Doralissa and Orlath

together to face the Dark.

If he had fallen when Jienna offered herself to him and then killed Lightflower…

Doralissa would have decreed war.

Hanir shivered as he continued to work, trying to find some entrance. What had happened to him was nothing compared to what could have happened had the Dark succeeded in corrupting him with Jienna and had he killed Lightflower in a fit of temper. Did he know, if he would have hit the Doralissan Prince and dragged him back when they faced the narrow tunnel, that he would have hit him just hard enough? Perhaps he would have killed him.

Or perhaps they would have succeeded in getting back, only to find that Lightflower's attendants weren't interested in listening to reasonable explanations.

Hanir smiled grimly.

"The Dark thinks it can have me," he said aloud, and his voice echoed, it seemed, in the stillness. "Yet I decree that this shall not happen. They may tempt me with what they like, with a sweet lover and with what seems the course of reason, but I shall not yield."

He drew Ulua and faced the sun, which hung above the mountains.

"They shall not have me," he said. "Oh Lord of Light…" He hesitated, since that was treading close to old blasphemy, to address the sun like that, but then he hardened his nerve and continued. "Oh Lord of Light, and in the name of the Cycle and Destiny and Elle, I swear that I will battle the Dark to the last and ignore temptation. They may tempt me, but they shall not triumph."

He raised Ulua, and a beam of sunlight flashed from the blade. Hanir blinked in the dazzling brightness and smiled as he saw that the beam shimmered with subtle colors. There was a hint of delicate silver, and the moving wheel of red, blue, white, and gold that meant the Cycle approved of what he had done. The silver was Elle, and apparently she wasn't upset about his near-blasphemy.

As if someone had whispered in his ear what to do, he turned.

The beam of sunlight burned as it fell on the rock, and then the stone shifted with a rumbling groan and opened. Hanir found himself gazing into another tunnel, though this one was anything but dark. Carved steps led up to what seemed a thin skin, perhaps a butterfly's gauzy wing, and it shimmered with dark blue light. The whole of his ascent would be in radiance, and by that he knew the Light approved.

"I shall do you proud," he whispered and then set foot on the steps.

Now that he was within the rock, he could hear sweet voices, sounds drowned out by the groaning of the wind outside. He walked up in confidence, listening to the patter and swing of the words, knowing it was the voice of his sister. Emmeldra was talking to someone very reasonably, by the sound…

Hanir tucked the thought away. No. Not reason. Reason had gotten him into enough trouble.

He came to the skin at last and leaned against it, staring through into the chamber beyond. It looked like the faceted inside of a great jewel, perhaps a night sapphire. And lying in a channel on the floor was the great gray dragon he had last seen flying over the Rashars the sunset just before he and Lightflower fell down the chasm, listening attentively to a figure with flame-red hair and glowing green-gold eyes.

His sister.

Hanir took a moment to study Emmy. Something was different about her, something about her face. He thought she looked as if she had grown, come through her own testing by the

Dark and into something like the noble strength that had always hung around her. Then, it had prefigured what she would become. Now, it was what she was.

Hanir grinned and drew his sword, then hacked at the blue webbing.

His sword sheared through.

The gray dragon turned her head, yellow eyes aflame, and roared. Hanir felt his blood pump through his veins. This was what he had trained for, all those long years of learning the noble and ancient art of fighting dragons. His gaze fixed on the heavy chest that held her heart.

"Hello, Emmy," he said, as he stepped through the torn webbing. "I've come to rescue you."

He glanced over and saw his sister smiling very slightly.

"But I don't need rescuing," she said.

That stopped Hanir short. He stared at her and then turned his gaze to Cloudshadow. "But she took you away!"

"Yes, I know." Emmeldra's movements as she stood and crossed the cave floor to stand by the dragon were almost indolent. "But I have convinced her to give me back to Mother." She grinned at him. "I have convinced her to come into an alliance with the Light."

Chapter Forty-Eight
Tilting

"Never mistake an enemy for an ally. It is a mistake that too many have made, to their everlasting sorrow."

—From The Book of Dealing With the Dark.

Pheron started awake and felt the Damned Spider grip him from behind and Rangeforest steady herself as he briefly lurched forward. *Amazing,* Pheron thought as he rubbed his eyes with his hand, *that I could sleep on a dragon's back. Of course, I was tired enough to sleep anywhere last night.*

"Where are we going?" he asked.

He half-expected Rangeforest to answer, but apparently the dragons had better hearing than he had thought. "A place I know," said Bloodsinger, his voice a rumble that seemed to sink into Pheron's bones. "No one will look for us there."

There was a finality in his voice that didn't encourage questions. Pheron fell silent, staring at the ground. He couldn't see enough to be useful, though, just the tops of trees. The sun hadn't yet risen, which seemed incredible, though a faint line of gold was creeping along the eastern horizon.

Bloodsinger had an incredibly smooth line of flight for a creature whose wings rose up and down with that tearing sound, and Pheron found himself lulled almost to sleep again before he abruptly began to fall up and down as he would on the back of a trotting horse. He clutched Rangeforest's waist, and she laughed at him.

"He's backwinging, that's all," she said.

Pheron relaxed but couldn't quite convince himself to remove his hand from her waist. "Of

course," he said. "I would have figured that out in a moment."

Rangeforest, apparently not worried at all by the bouncing motion, twisted on the dragon's back and glanced at him. "You weren't going to say you knew that?"

"No."

Rangeforest nodded solemnly, as if that indicated a lot more about Pheron than his honesty—and a lot more than he would have thought it could indicate—and turned forward again. Pheron gritted his teeth. *Darkworkers must all practice that knowing, quiet expression in front of a mirror.*

Bloodsinger circled lower and lower, and Pheron saw the treetops looming towards them so suddenly that he was glad the dragon wasn't diving. He was sure that he would have lost his dinner. Bloodsinger spread his wings wide and leveled off just above the trees. Pheron kicked a branch and started.

"He knows what he's doing," said Rangeforest, a touch of impatience in her voice.

Pheron said nothing, but he did wonder how she knew that. Perhaps she had stayed awake and spoken with Bloodsinger while he slept.

He was determined to speak with the dragon himself, the moment that certain circumstances—such as a piece of flat ground—permitted.

Bloodsinger abruptly curved his wings and turned, so suddenly that the humans and the Damned Spider would have been thrown off his back if not for the protection of his hunched wing muscles. Pheron saw a corridor in the trees rushing towards them, and then they entered it before he had time to scream.

Trees flashed past, twigs just an inch from Bloodsinger's scales, and in some instances less. Bloodsinger was slowing, but they still went fast enough that trees just showed as dark blurs. Pheron tightened his grip on Rangeforest's waist and hoped Bloodsinger really knew what he was doing. He flew as if he had been down this corridor before, but suppose it had changed?

Then, abruptly, Bloodsinger threw his wings wide.

The corridor ceased in the same instant.

Bloodsinger hovered for a moment, his body bobbing even more violently than before, and then settled to the wide clearing that had opened up around them. Pheron stared. The clearing was more than big enough for a dragon. In fact, it might be large enough for as many as three. And when he slid down from Bloodsinger's side, he slid from hard scales directly onto soft ground. Gentle babble from the side spoke of a stream. This really was a place they could stay for a while.

"How did you know this was here?" he asked the dragon.

Bloodsinger turned his head. The growing light of dawn revealed little of his red scales, but his eyes were brilliant enough that Pheron could see the emotion in them. "My mate and I came here to sport," he said. "The next day, she laid our egg."

"The one that Emmeldra smashed?" It was hard to face eyes so large, so aglow with magic and power and personality, but Pheron clung to his feet.

"Yes."

"I am sorry."

Bloodsinger stared at him for a moment more, then turned his head away. "So am I," he said. "And Cloudshadow and your sister shall be sorrier."

Pheron let out a little breath. "I'm sure. But what does that have to do with me? I can appreciate that you're angry at your Queen, but why rescue me?"

Rangeforest, passing behind him, pushed him in the middle of the back. Pheron stumbled.

"Would you ask a ghioutli that spared your life the reason for it?" the Darkworker asked, stepping past him and splashing into the stream. She dunked her face and her hair, then came back up and drank a handful of water before she turned to look at him again. "Don't ask a dragon, either."

"But I have to know," said Pheron. "If you took me up just to kill me later…"

He stopped, because the Damned Spider had interrupted him with an angry chatter. He looked down and saw the Spider reared beside him, legs pointed at Bloodsinger. Bloodsinger chuckled and looked back up at him.

"How did you come to be protected by a Deathweaver spider?"

Pheron shook his head. "I don't know. I didn't even know that its kind was called Deathweaver until yesterday. Will you tell me why you rescued me?"

Bloodsinger lay down, his tail and body moving with supreme grace, and then folded his wings so quickly that he nearly crushed Haljen. The man gave a little scream and stood trembling for a moment. Pheron glanced at him, but he waved him off and splashed to the stream after Rangeforest.

"For much the same reason as you stay with your Spider," said Bloodsinger, blinking at him. "It's right. You don't know why it's right, but it is. I think that you can be useful to me in my own revenge. At the very least, capturing you and keeping you from her vengeance will frustrate the Queen."

"You won't kill me to take revenge on my sister?"

Bloodsinger bared his fangs. "From what I could see, your sister cares only for herself. I doubt she would care if I took revenge on you."

Pheron nodded in spite of his instant conviction that he should protest against this characterization of Emmeldra. It was much the truth. It was what he had thought for years, even, and had not expressed because it would not be politic. "So what are we going to do?" he asked, sitting down on the soft covering of the clearing. Grass or moss, it was inordinately comfortable. He didn't think he would have any trouble stretching out and falling asleep. The Damned Spider settled at his side for a moment, then turned and scuttled into the forest, probably to begin weaving a web.

"I brought you here so that we would have time to think of a plan," said Bloodsinger. "No one else knows of this place but my mate."

"Where is she?"

"Still with Cloudshadow." Bloodsinger tilted his head and flicked his tongue. "It will take some time to persuade her to my way of thinking, but I shall do it. And she is occupied with her own orders at the moment. She won't come here, even looking for me."

"I know what we should do," said Rangeforest. Pheron turned his head, studying her in the growing dawn light. She seemed refreshed, though so far as he knew she hadn't slept at all. She flung herself down in the grass next to Bloodsinger's head and leaned confidingly close. "Go to another area where the *Grellan Ashen* will put us under the control of a sympathetic lieutenant. Neither Cloudshadow nor Jienna have reason to love us, but some of the others would. I can be useful, and I am sure that you could be as well, Bloodsinger, with your speed and your fire."

Bloodsinger lay, looking at her but saying nothing. It was Haljen, somewhat to Pheron's surprise, who spoke up decisively.

"No. They may want to use us, but they won't fight against the whole of the Dark, and Jienna and Cloudshadow are both part of the greater Dark—and vital to it, might I add. They would only give us back to the ones who hate us or kill us out of hand. Three humans, a dragon,

and a Deathweaver spider aren't worth starting an inner struggle over."

"So we must give them something that is," said Pheron.

He was surprised that he had spoken, and from the way the others' eyes turned to him, they were as well. Rangeforest shook her head, and though Pheron still couldn't see her face that well in the shadowy mixture of dawnlight and light from Bloodsinger's eyes, he thought she was frowning. "No. This is the time of war with the Light. The Dark can't afford too many distractions. If we put ourselves into the service of another lieutenant, we can still be useful, and Jienna and Cloudshadow can't touch us."

"I don't care about that."

Bloodsinger's words were quiet, but that meant little, since they still made the earth shake. Pheron saw Rangeforest turn her head and look at the dragon.

"You don't care about that?" she asked.

"No." Bloodsinger spread his wings, just slightly, and moved them in a complicated pattern that probably meant something, though Pheron wasn't sure what. "I don't. I am free from Cloudshadow now, and since she is no longer my Queen, then that means I have no obligation to honor her commitments. She was the one who chose to join the Dark. I will not fight for them any longer. The war between Dark and Light is not my concern now. Vengeance is." He turned his head, eyes glittering, to fix them on Pheron. "Using the Prince of Orlath, somehow."

"I thought you were going to wait until after the war to take your vengeance," said Rangeforest, sounding surprised. "Let the Dark win, and then take Cloudshadow when she is no longer vital to the war effort."

"No. I want my vengeance to go as well as possible. If the best plan to secure it means waiting until the war is over, then I will do so. But if I have the opportunity to take it before then, then I will."

"You can't—"

"I can," said Bloodsinger calmly, and something, perhaps the depth of his words, made Rangeforest quiet. He looked back at Pheron. "I think that you can help me, Prince of Orlath. After all, neither Dark nor Light want you, and both hunt you."

"There are hunters of the Light?"

Bloodsinger nodded. "Before I came to you, I performed a last service for Cloudshadow and flew to the castle to establish a new spy in your mother's court. I heard enough to be certain that Queen Annilda is searching for you, most strenuously. Apparently someone planted the rumor that you were Dark, and she thinks that your flight is connected with the Dark attacks."

"It isn't."

"Try telling that to someone of the Light." Bloodsinger scraped a paw in what Pheron could see now, with the growing light, was definitely moss. "Mad, all of them. So. You can't go back to your mother's court, and the Dark will be hunting you. Will you help me?"

Pheron hesitated. He had once heard his mother say that Destiny guiding one's purposes was like a sense of firm and absolute certainty, knowledge that nothing could go wrong now. He didn't think he felt that, but this feeling within him now was the closest he had ever come to it in his life.

"Bloodsinger," he said, "what kind of vengeance do you want to take on Cloudshadow?"

"The most fitting one."

"So it doesn't have to be bloody?"

Bloodsinger snarled. "Hardly. I would like her to lose all hope before she dies. If I can only kill her by tearing her apart, then I will do that, but I would prefer that she despair."

"And my sister?"

"The same."

Pheron nodded. "Can you light a small fire for me?" He felt around until he picked up a twig from the moss and held it out.

Rangeforest said, "What are you doing?"

Haljen said, "You can't take revenge on the Queen of the Dragons. There are still too many of her people who love her, and they will tear you apart."

Bloodsinger raised his head, his eyes fixed on Pheron, and breathed gentle fire.

The twig flamed. Pheron caught his breath. "I would like to speak with the fire," he said.

The flames coiled and took shape at once, and then the serpent was resting around his arm. Haljen gasped, and Pheron heard Rangeforest hiss, "What is that thing? And why isn't it burning him? He's not a Scarlet mage."

Pheron glanced at Bloodsinger and found the dragon was very still.

Pheron turned back to the snake. "Are you relieved to see me alive?" he asked. "And do you still want me to carry a message for the People of the Blending?"

"Yes to both." The snake turned its head and fixed golden eyes on Pheron's companions. "Can you trust these?"

"I think so," said Pheron. "At least, I am sure that I can trust them not to do anything stupid." He looked at Bloodsinger again, and the dragon was still silent, still intent. "The message will help to stop the war between the Dark and Light?"

"We hope so," said the snake.

"Bloodsinger," said Pheron, "how committed is Cloudshadow to the war with the Light?"

"Deeply committed," said Bloodsinger. "Her pride was insulted." He spoke in the same low, barely moving voice, eyes on the snake still.

"So, if she were to lose—not because the Light won, but because the war ceased to exist—would that wound her pride?"

Bloodsinger twisted his head and looked at Pheron. Then he said, "She has led all our people into this. She has embraced the Cycle and Destiny and the way that the creatures native-born to Light and Dark think. She has sacrificed our freedom for what she believes is the right thing to do, entering this war and becoming slaves to the Cycle. Let someone shatter that, and she would die of despair. Yes, if the war ceased to exist, her pride would bleed to death. If someone could stop the war."

Pheron grinned. "Would you like to help me?"

Chapter Forty-Nine
Tilting the Balance

"One must always be careful when changing something that has long endured, lest one tilt the balance of the world."

—From Prophets of the Dark: Knowing the Enemy, proverbs of the Dark compiled by Yillos Goldfleet.

Emmeldra stood there a moment, smiling at her brother's surprise. And, she had to admit, basking in the glory of her accomplishment.

She turned back to Cloudshadow and saw the golden eyes regarding her with wariness. Cloudshadow still sometimes thought this was the wrong thing to do. Emmeldra only had to work a little longer, though, and the Dragon Queen would see that it was the right thing to do, the only right thing.

"Emmy?"

Emmeldra turned her head back and smiled at Hanir. "I know this must come as somewhat of a shock," she said soothingly. "But I promise you, the Dragon Queen is now our ally." She could feel his confusion. Sometimes, when one of them was distracted or feeling strongly enough, emotions would pass from one twin's mind to another in the bond they always shared because of their dual birth. Emmeldra had heard that some twins had even stronger bonds. In some ways, she regretted that she and Hanir didn't have one like that. What a weapon it would have been in the war against the Dark!

"We've fought dragons," said Hanir, his face and voice blank. "We've always fought dragons. I swore an oath to the Light on the way into this cave. I wouldn't allow myself to be tempted by the Dark."

Emmeldra snorted. "You think an opportunity to end part of our war is a temptation of the Dark?"

"I do," said Hanir darkly. "You wouldn't believe what I've seen, Emmeldra, what I've learned." He shook his head, and Emmeldra felt a cloud rising in his mind. Before she could figure out what it was, though, he took a deep breath and fixed his eyes on her. "Are you sure that the dragons are our allies?"

"I am sure."

Hanir turned his head to look at Cloudshadow. Emmeldra looked, too, and felt a thrill of pride in her student. Cloudshadow wasn't glaring at Hanir as if he were a parasite, as if being human were an offense, the way that she had looked at Emmeldra when she first brought her to the Rashars. She was gazing as she would at an equal, and even then she sometimes glanced down and away. She was conscious of the great sin that the dragons must have committed, now, even if it was long ago and unknowingly. She knew that she wasn't worthy to be on the same level as Destined humans who had never committed such a sin.

"Why?" Hanir asked bluntly.

"Your sister has made me realize that the old ways of living are wrong," said Cloudshadow. "We thought that we had freedom, but in reality, it was nothing but aimlessness. We hunted as did the beasts of the field and killed humans just because we could. We weren't acting like intelligent beings, beings who have truly embraced the Cycle and Destiny." She shook her head. "What use is it to live 'free' if nothing you do endures after you, and you do not judge your actions on the scale of right and wrong?"

Emmeldra smiled and couldn't resist patting the dragon's neck, just a little. Cloudshadow turned her head and stared at her, and Emmeldra withdrew her hand. The dragon still had her pride. It would take some more time to make her realize that that, too, was a sin.

"And so what will you do?" Hanir asked.

"We will return you and Emmeldra to your home," said Cloudshadow. The words still sounded as though recited by rote, as indeed all of her words had, but Emmeldra wasn't worried about that. That was the way children learned, too, repeating the words over and over again

until they sank into their brains. When they achieved the proper understanding, then they could start to appreciate what they were saying, and fashioning new words of their own. "Then we will join the armies of the Light."

"What do you seek?" asked Hanir. Emmeldra flashed him an annoyed glance. She wished he wouldn't insist on questioning the miracle. He was likely to irritate Cloudshadow and perhaps even make her rethink her conversion. He just didn't know the right way to talk to dragons.

"Forgiveness," said the dragon. "Redemption for our crime, by the Cycle, and Destiny, and by Elle." She grimaced as she said that last word, but Emmeldra only smiled patiently. The goddess wasn't quite real to her yet. That stage, too, would pass.

"Do you think that will work?" asked Hanir.

"Yes."

"It will work," said Emmeldra. "Of course it must. The Cycle and Destiny forgive any who come with a sincere and repentant heart, and Elle will take them under her wing and guide them to their Destinies." She stepped back and looked at Cloudshadow critically. No, it wasn't her imagination. There was a faint line of light around the dragon's form that hadn't been there before. Cloudshadow was acquiring a Destiny.

Soon the dragons would be part of the Cycle. Emmeldra didn't think any greater victory had been won since Queen Aneron's redemption of the elves.

"I don't believe it."

Shocked and hurt, Emmeldra turned to Hanir. He had his arms folded, and there was a sick, angry expression on his face that she had never seen before.

"What do you mean, Hanir?"

He darted a glance at her, and she blinked. There was a real darkness in his eyes. Suspicion stirred, and she stepped back. What if this wasn't her brother at all, but some Dark changeling come in his form, seeking to undo her great victory?

No; she could feel his mind. It must be him. But something had happened to change him and lure him closer to the Dark.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Prince Lightflower is dead, Emmy." Hanir's voice was low, the grief carefully locked out of it.

The cave spun. Emmeldra went to her knees, staring at Hanir. Cloudshadow looked back and forth between them; Emmeldra was aware of the movement of that great head, even though she wasn't looking directly at her.

"But—he can't be," said Emmeldra blankly, remembering the way he had looked when he rode into the courtyard. Green eyes, alight with Destiny. He would never turn to the Dark, and he couldn't have died before he married her and they had the children she had foreseen. Her prophecy even spoke of the green-eyed destiny. She had assumed that would be Lightflower. "How could his moment of Destiny have come so soon?"

"It wasn't that." Hanir lowered his sword and rubbed his hand across his face. Emmeldra looked up and saw that tired lines she hadn't seen before marked his skin. "We ran into a group of creatures in the earth, the People of the Blending. They took his Destiny from him, because they can do that. And he grew despondent without it and killed himself. Emmy, I'm so sorry."

Emmeldra gasped. "You didn't see him dead? This was what they told you?"

Hanir nodded.

"Then he might still be alive." Emmeldra stood and dusted off her hands, angry at her brother for giving her such a fright. "How could you think that anything could take away

Destiny, Hanir? It's ridiculous on the face of it. Destiny is as much a part of us as our eyes and hair. It's what we're born with. Someone can't take it away from us."

Hanir shook his head, his eyes unreadable. "I don't know. The one I met seemed to be speaking the truth, Emmeldra. They claimed they had told Queen Aneron to found the Kingdom of Orlath as a refuge from the wars of Light and Dark. But the war followed, and so they were sending agents to try and spread a message of peace, counteracting the war."

Emmeldra laughed. "If they're so important, why has no one ever heard of them?"

"They leave no traces on the surface."

"But they let you leave with your memory intact? Did you agree to help them?"

"No!" Hanir's denial was quick and fierce. But then he hesitated. "I don't know why they let me leave remembering them," he muttered.

"They were tricking you," said Emmeldra, and ignored the impulse to wag her finger under her brother's nose. "They wanted you to spread the news of Lightflower's death, so that we would think we had powerful enemies who were capable of taking away Destiny, and despair. Well." She took a deep breath and shoved the grief to the back of her mind. "They must be holding him prisoner. We'll find him."

"But then, what are they?" Hanir asked. "I did see one wield all four elemental magics, Emmeldra. I know they can do that."

"That's impossible."

"I saw one do it."

Emmeldra shook her head. "Some of the creatures of the Dark are very good at illusions, Hanir. This one spun convincing illusions and a convincing lie." She studied her brother out of the corner of her eye. "Though I must say, I don't know why you believed them. You must have known that nothing could take Destiny away, and you ought to have challenged their saying so."

"What are you suggesting, Emmeldra?" Hanir spoke lightly, but his fingers wrapped around Ulua's hilt.

Emmeldra shrugged. "Not much, Hanir. But you might have more sympathy to the Dark than you think. They will try to tempt you. Watch out for it."

"That is why I swore the oath to the Light."

Emmeldra nodded and turned to look at Cloudshadow. "You will fly us back to the castle and our mother?"

"I will," said Cloudshadow. "But first, I want to make sure that I understand the terms of our bargain."

"Bargain?" Hanir stepped back, renewing his clutch on Ulua's hilt. "Emmy—"

"Hush," said Emmeldra, frowning at him and thinking that she would have to break him of his paranoia and calling her by that annoying nickname. Perhaps she would teach him how to talk to dragons on their journey. "It's just a term." She looked at Cloudshadow. "I agree, and I think I can promise you that our mother, Queen Annilda, will agree as well."

"Her own blood," said Cloudshadow. "Her own son."

"He is not her son, or he would have had Destiny and elemental magic," said Emmeldra. "Granted, she bore him, but that can mean many things. He is her son by blood, but not by spirit."

"What are you talking about?" asked Hanir.

Emmeldra glanced at him. "Pheron wounded the Queen when she attacked Corlinth. He smashed his hand through her eyes. Can you imagine such a barbaric and useless gesture? He escaped, but soon enough he'll come crawling back to the castle like the worm he is. Cloudshadow

has decided that she would like to have him as part of the price for coming to the Light."

"Price?"

"It's just an expression," said Emmeldra impatiently. When would he learn? She looked up at the Queen again. "Agreed. You can have Pheron."

The dragon glanced at her torture rack again, then nodded and spread her wings. "Climb on," she said. "I will carry you to the castle and let you off my back in plain sight, as a first sign of the new alliance between human and dragon."

"The dragons attacked Corlinth?" asked Hanir in a low voice as he followed Emmeldra onto Cloudshadow's back.

"Yes, but they're sorry for it."

Hanir said nothing for a moment. Then, as Cloudshadow spread her wings, he said, "And Pheron smashed his hand through her eyes?"

"He was driven by someone," said Emmeldra. "He had to be. Can you imagine him doing something like that on his own?"

"I don't know," said Hanir. "I don't think that I ever really knew him well enough to say if he would or wouldn't."

"I did," said Emmeldra. "He would make such a cowardly and cruel gesture. Leaving an enemy alive and bleeding from her eyes!"

Cloudshadow turned and prepared to fly.

Emmeldra beamed. She was without her Lightflower, of course, but they would come back and rescue him. Those People of the Blending, or whatever they really were, had to be lying. They had let Hanir escape and spread the tale to spread panic. Her prince was alive, and she would find him.

Nothing could take away Destiny. It was ridiculous on the face of it.

Chapter Fifty
Negotiating

"Always negotiate from a position of strength—unless, of course, you favor being suspended upside down by your ankles from a cliff while the wind howls in your ears."

—Last words of Calos Dimshine, assumed to refer to an unspecified incident in his youth.

Pheron hid his head beneath his arm, at least as much as he could. Rangeforest and Bloodsinger were arguing again, and there wasn't much that he could do when one voice was shrill with anger and the other was a dragon's voice.

"You would do this mad thing?"

"It is not mad." There was a hiss beneath Bloodsinger's words, and Pheron was almost sure that he felt a puff of heat move across him. "The Dark has not been so good to me that I should agree to be its loyal servant. And I will not be its slave."

"But nothing can resist the force of the Cycle and Destiny. The war will still be fought. But it will crush you in its path, when it could have saved you."

"You don't know that. Besides, even if I can't stop the war I am going to try."

Pheron nodded silently into the ground. Those last words echoed his own thoughts. They were the words he had used to stop Rangeforest arguing at him several hours ago. The Darkworker had thrown up her hands and stormed away. From the sounds of it, she was doing the same thing again now.

"Pheron."

Pheron sat up with a small smile and turned around. The fire-snake coiled there, not burning the grass it lay on. At least the People of the Blending, when they had heard that he didn't like the title of Prince of Orlath, had agreed not to call him that. They were the only ones in the camp whom he could depend on not to do it. Even Bloodsinger forgot at times.

"Yes?"

"There is news that you should know."

Pheron's stomach tightened unpleasantly. The fire-snake's golden eyes were fixed on his face, and it looked almost poised to dart away, as if it thought that he would try to kill it after hearing its news. "What is it?" he asked quietly, hunching forward. He wound up putting his elbow directly on a snapped bone from their meal earlier that day and had to stifle a yelp as he shoved it away.

"The dragons have switched sides," said the Person of the Blending. "Cloudshadow has flown back to your mother's castle with Hanir and Emmeldra on her back."

Pheron let out a slow breath. "And you think that it is real and not just a deception?" He could easily imagine the Dragon Queen feigning loyalty to get into the heart of the fortress of the Light, and then destroying it from within.

"If it is a deception, then she has not told even her own people of it," said the snake. "And her people are unhappy about it. Things are beginning to move fast, and this war may be shorter and more violent than we thought. The Light will have confidence, and they will attack sooner. The Dark will have less, and they will launch many bloody attacks soon."

Pheron sighed. This was such an alien position to be in, contemplating things far away and thinking about how they could affect plans he had yet to set in motion. It was one that he was sure one of his relatives would be distinctly at home in, and that made it the more alien. "And what do you think we can or should do about it?" They had only agreed to try to stop the war, not formulating anything beyond the vague "bearing a message" that had been all the People of the Blending intended to ask of him. Now that they knew he was willing to try and had a dragon on his side and was outside the Cycle, the People of the Blending appeared to have grander ideas.

"There is one thing that will happen soon," said the snake. "Bloodsinger, while still trying to act under Cloudshadow's orders, tried to prevent it, but it will still happen."

"What is that?"

"The fulfillment of your sister Emmeldra's prophecy."

Pheron blinked. "You are skilled indeed if you can read that," he said. "I thought no one knew the time of prophecies except through hindsight."

"That is usually true," said the snake. "But we can look outside the Cycle, and we see the time of the prophecy approaching, just as one can see a spoke on a wheel getting ready to pass one's position. It is soon, and she will launch a wave of blood."

"I thought a wave of blood was flowing now."

"This will be worse."

Pheron shook his head as he imagined that. "All right. But what do you think we can do

to stop her? I thought that no one could intervene in a prophecy once it had begun, not even a dragon or a Person of the Blending." So the snake had told him when Pheron asked why they didn't simply kidnap his family so that they couldn't come near the sites of their prophecy. Destiny would form a wall around them that even a Person of the Blending couldn't walk through.

"There is another solution," said the snake. "One that is risky, but which I think you can perform."

Pheron narrowed his eyes. "Me?"

"Yes."

Pheron waited for a moment, but the snake said nothing more. At last, Pheron sighed and gave in. Only one day speaking with a Person of the Blending, and he was already coming to accept that they had their own strange rules. "What is it I can do?"

"There is an art that we have, the snatching away of Destiny," said the snake. "We can strip someone of Destiny and stop the prophecy that way."

"Then do that to Emmeldra," said Pheron.

"There are ancient defenses around the castle," said the snake, "that Queen Aneron made sure to include, since she knew of us. We cannot enter the castle for as long as a prophecy is flowing, and I think that anyone there who is an elemental mage will find it deeply difficult to use his or her magic, except one who is chosen to work it in the fulfillment of the prophecy."

Pheron blinked. "So you cannot enter, because you are allied in nature to the elements."

The snake nodded slowly.

"But what makes you think that I could enter?" asked Pheron. "Surely the protections would include something against the creatures of the Dark, as well?"

"Yes and no," said the snake quietly. "Any creatures of Dark who played a part in the prophecy could still enter. They are subject to the Cycle and Destiny as well, after all." It hesitated. "In truth, there are two layers of protection: one against malevolent interference by elemental magic, and one against malevolent interference by the Dark. But you, Pheron, have neither."

Pheron blinked, then held out his hand and called the clay.

The snake shook its head slowly. "Your magic is not elemental. We are not sure what it is, but we do not believe it is that. And if it does have some kinship with the elements, then it is of a blended nature, which your Queen Aneron did not know of the existence of—even we are allied to the pure elements—and which there are no protections against."

"Then Rangeforest—"

"Is of the Dark and could not enter." The snake coiled back on itself, swaying slightly though it kept its eyes on Pheron. "It is entirely possible, of course, that we could find another candidate. I do not think that you are unique, though some of my people do. But you are the only one we know of who could bypass the protections of Destiny, since you are outside Destiny. We are outside Destiny, but we are bound to the Cycle. You are free of both."

Pheron blinked again and looked at his hand. "And what would I do once I was there?"

"Take Emmeldra's Destiny away from her."

"I thought that only a Person of the Blending could do that."

"We believe that we can teach you how to do that. We are not entirely sure, of course."

"But you are sure that relieving Emmeldra of her Destiny would spare the people of Orlath some pain?"

The snake nodded.

Pheron contemplated his hand again. His head was reeling. This sounded almost like something that Destiny would set him up to do, but if it was, then it meant that he wasn't really invisible to Destiny. And it certainly seemed as if he was. Bloodsinger still couldn't see him. He focused on him by the sound of his voice, by the presence of the Damned Spider, and by the things that Pheron held that he could see, such as the twig that he had set afire.

"How would I get in?" asked Pheron at last.

"Walk in."

"I couldn't—"

"No," said the snake, gently but firmly. "Bloodsinger won't be able to fly through the wards. And while he might fly you there, he could not get inside the castle itself once Emmeldra's prophecy begins to come true. You will get there quickly, but once you go through the wards, you will be on your own. We will come as close as we can, and if you manage to snap the wards by destroying her Destiny, we will be ready to help you. But until those wards are snapped, we can't help. You might as well be in another world."

Pheron clenched his hand into a fist, getting clay all over his fingers. He didn't mind. The coolness helped him relax and think. "Is there any word on where my brother Prince Leroth is?"

"No," said the snake. "The last that we knew, he was in the world of Dezeywandu. We sent a messenger to him, and he refused us. Why? Is it important?"

Pheron forced a smile. "If he isn't there, I will rest the easier. If he cuts my *other* arm off, I'm not sure what good I'll be."

The snake gently wreathed its head around his arm, a sign of approbation. "You'll do well," it said quietly. "I will send another to you tomorrow morning, someone who can teach you better than I." It turned, and writhed into flames, and vanished.

Pheron sat staring into the darkness, thinking, and didn't hear the footsteps until a pair of hands clasped over his eyes.

"Rangeforest," he said in the sudden darkness, "stop playing."

She removed her hands from his eyes and dropped in front of him, her own eyes sparking with anger. "You're really going to do this, aren't you?" she asked.

"You heard?"

She looked at him blankly, and Pheron realized she had probably meant trying to stop the war, not any of the things the snake had told him. Well, it was best to tell her. He was almost sure that Bloodsinger would insist on remaining here with him while he learned from the People of the Blending, and then flying him to the castle. Rangeforest should be free to go her own way.

"We're going to try and stop my sister Emmeldra's prophecy from working," he said. "The People of the Blending will teach me to destroy someone's Destiny, and then I'll go to the castle and take it away from her."

Rangeforest gave him an even blanker look, but it transformed to rage soon enough. Pheron winced and leaned away from her. He hadn't thought that she could be as angry as Jienna, but it seemed she could. And she would kill him with a lightning bolt, not worry about torturing him.

"Alone?"

"Yes, alone. The People of the Blending told me that once a prophecy begins to function, no Dark agents or workers of elemental magic except those who would aid the prophecy can enter the castle. And I don't think the People of the Blending would count," he added.

"But you—"

"Have neither elemental magic, nor allegiance to the Dark," said Pheron. "The last will

hold you out, and both of them will hold Haljen out. Not that I really want to take him," he said softly, glancing aside at the man. Haljen slept, but several times he had awakened from obvious nightmares with screams. Pheron shuddered to think of what it would be like for him to go back to the castle in the company of a Deathweaver spider.

"So you'll be alone?"

"Yes, unless the Damned Spider can also cross the wards," said Pheron, turning back to her.

Rangeforest shook her head, her lips white. "I could live with you if you played at this, saw it was impossible, and then returned to the real war against the Light," she said softly. "But you're proposing to destroy yourself, and with it, all your possible further usefulness."

"To what?"

"Any cause that will have you." Rangeforest leaned forward. "Hasn't it occurred to you that the People of the Blending are agents of the Light, trying to get you to destroy yourself because you aren't useful to their side but you could be useful to the Dark?"

"Tell me," said Pheron. "In what would my usefulness consist? Jienna mentioned much the same thing, over and over, but never got around to telling me just what it meant."

Rangeforest smiled and sat back. Pheron watched her in confusion for a moment, then realized she thought she had won. He snorted softly. She would learn how wrong she was, but there was no harm in allowing her to speak first. She might say something useful.

"There are several different things that might affect you," she said. "You have the blood of Queen Aneron. That is always useful, a legitimate tie to a royal line—"

"I could not rule without my mother's consent," said Pheron.

"Ah," said Rangeforest very softly. "But if your mother were dead in war? There was a similar case in Rivendon, where three monarchs ruled for the Dark before the Light produced an obscure heir from a junior branch that was loyal to it. The Queen died fighting in war and couldn't name her eldest daughter to the throne. But she ruled anyway."

"That is dishonest."

Rangeforest sighed. "There's also the pure symbolism of so much of what you have."

"Symbolism?" asked Pheron blankly. He had thought for most of his life that his problem was lack of dramatic symbolic things, not having them.

"You're crippled, but you stayed alive," said Rangeforest. "And you're royal, but you were treated as common for most of your life. The common people can be persuaded to love you."

"What would that lead to?"

"A more secure throne," said Rangeforest.

"Tell me, is there any 'useful' thing I can do that doesn't involve my blood in some way?"

"I'm sure that I could think of some."

Pheron rolled his eyes. "My lady, I respect you. And I respect that you are as true-to your side as the ones of the Light are to theirs, and aren't evil. But I won't rule for you. I have no right. The throne will pass to one of my brothers or my sister, and it should. They are the heirs, the ones who are trained to rule. I might have the symbolism, and I might not be as Destiny-obsessed as they are, but I don't have the training."

"You would have help."

Pheron had to smile. "I'm sure I would," he said.

"I could still report you to one of the Dark lieutenants, you know," said Rangeforest softly. "Leave here and go to one of them and have them stop Bloodsinger. There are deadlier hunters than the ones Jienna commanded."

Pheron regarded her steadily. "I would guess the thought has not been uppermost in your mind, or you would have mentioned it before now."

"I don't want to do it," said Rangeforest. "And I won't if you promise me something."

"What is that?"

"Observe things very carefully when you go to the castle, and tell me, if you come out of there alive: do you really think that your sister and brothers are the best rulers the land could have?"

Pheron smiled again. The negotiations had been simple enough, after all. "I will look for it, my lady, though I can't guarantee that I will come out again."

"You should." Rangeforest stood up, composed once more, and smoothed her skirts. "Otherwise we could spread a legend of your death, and use it to inspire the Dark soldiers."

Chapter Fifty-One
Negotiations with His Bruises

"Never forget to distrust the agents of the Dark. They have a reason for whatever they do, and it will not be beneficial for anyone who loves the Light and lives in it. Apply this fundamental rule always: Distrust what they say, distrust what they do, and if they appear to be trying to do you a good turn, be sure that it only covers an evil turn of far more fundamental wickedness.

"Of course, losing hope in the Light is never a good thing, either."

—Yillos Goldfleet, while drunk.

Leroth opened his eyes slowly.

He was lying on the grass of the Corlirin Plains.

He stood, shakily, and at once collapsed again. His legs ached so fiercely that he was surprised he had been able to stand at all. He looked down and saw they were covered with bruises, probably from the flat of the elf King's blade.

And he was a King, at least as far as fighting went. Leroth had to grudgingly admit that. He crouched, bracing his hands against the earth, and looked around, wary that all of this could just be an elven illusion.

It didn't seem to be. The grass of the Plains was definitely golden, not the milky color that it had been when he rode across the plains of Dezeywandu with Anjoa, and he couldn't see any hostile pegasi in the air. The smell of the earth was hot, ripe, the smell of the grass in the summer sun. And he couldn't see the strange snow-tipped mountains that had blocked his way east in the other world.

He was home.

Tears spilled down his cheeks and onto the ground. Leroth was not entirely surprised to see that the grass turned to receive them. The tears of a true Prince of Orlath, rejoicing in his homecoming, would be precious to the grass and might even be life-giving to it.

A true Prince of Orlath…

Leroth glanced at the bandaged cut on his arm and winced. He had to get home as soon

as possible and explain to his mother that he hadn't really thought that Hanir was of the Dark. Then he could go back to being unspoiled and unstained by treachery to the line of Aneron.

Yes, that was what he would do.

Provided he could stand.

He stood and fell over.

He lay on the ground, cursing, and then fell silent, closing his eyes and praying for patience. After all, it was probably a test that the elves had dumped him here, to suffer from his bruises. They wanted him to be humiliated, to be so humiliated that he wouldn't dare go home.

He would show them. He would go home, and speak to his mother, and receive his brother's and sister's blessing. Then he would be part of the family again, and he could watch Hanir ruling in Orlath with a wise face. Perhaps he could offer his counsel and become famous in song as having redeemed himself, even while he pined for his mermaid love.

"I haven't thought of her in so long," whispered Leroth, as he forced himself into a crawl towards the east. There lay his home, on the borders of the ocean that held her. "Why haven't I thought of her? She would have helped me nearly as much as the thought of Elle in my prison."

Someone appeared in front of him.

Leroth looked up gladly, thinking for a moment that Destiny had sent him someone who would help, and then recoiled as he saw it was the pale elfwoman who had taken the blood from his arm. She smiled at him, and her teeth gleamed with blood. She reached out a hand and brushed it against his cheek even as Leroth tried to move back, revolted. He couldn't feel her touch very strongly, not as strongly as he would have been able to if he was still in Dezeywandu, but he did feel something scuttling over him, like the legs of a spider.

"You will never be free," said the elfwoman softly. "You still don't realize the truth, the reason that we could use your blood to open the gate."

"Then tell me."

"No," said the elfwoman and laughed like a child, though her merriment was higher, shriller, and infinitely more evil. "Did you really think that I would?" she snapped at him and then vanished like a heat shimmer or a wind in the grasses.

Leroth cursed her again, and then called on his Gust magic, sending his mind rising above the Plains. It felt wonderful to have the freedom of the air again, and for a moment he just played and exulted, not caring about much else, before he turned his attention to the ground.

He felt his heart thump, once and hard, though usually he wasn't aware of the sensations of his body while riding like this.

The Plains were burned and smoking in many places. Looking north and west, he saw the ruined, steaming hunk of Corlinth. Far to the south, Ozue was an empty place, scoured clean by powerful magic. He saw the first clashes between the soldiers of the Light and goblins in the high hills, saw a dragon fall to elven arrows, saw a wave of refugees running to the castle on the coast.

The war had begun.

And if the spirit-sick elves managed to escape Dezeywandu, then the war would become worse. The tales of the elves' cruelties were the darkest ones, not told to children as were many of the other history-tales of Orlath but saved for whispered conversation among adults. And even then, there were many who did not like to think about them. The thought of those dark old times returning…

He had to get to the castle, and he had to get there quickly.

Leroth took a deep breath and began to draw on his Gust magic. He didn't know if he could do this. He had never done it before. But old legends said that Gust mages had once learned to

do many things that were supposed to be impossible now: read the breath in someone's body, control sylphs, and ride the wind, as Leroth was trying to do now. If the most glorious legends were right, and it took not training, so much as raw power, then he should be able to turn into the wind, body and all, and ride it home as swiftly as a breeze could run.

He felt his power strain, his forward-leaping mind calling on his body, unable to think why it should stay behind and be a solid object.

He felt the change begin.

His body grew light, lighter, lightest. He could feel a creeping hollowness in his bones, as if they were become the bones of a bird. His flesh shifted and turned, and he could almost feel it sloughing off. His shoulder muscles stirred as if they would spring into wings.

Leroth laughed in exultation.

Then he called out in pain.

Something had hit him on the back of the head. Leroth opened his eyes and stared around, wondering if someone had come along who could help him.

No. The elfwoman stood smiling off to the side again. With great effort, she took up another rock and tossed it, this time aiming at one of his bruises and hitting it. Leroth gasped as pain flared up his leg.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"What do you think?" she asked and aimed and threw another stone.

Leroth snarled. She was distracting him from becoming the Gust, that was what she was doing. But she had little more power than a ghost in this world, at least if the legends he had heard were true, and he had only to direct the wind against her. It would shred her.

The wind at his direction turned and tried to do just that.

The smile faded from the elfwoman's face. She bowed her head and folded her arms. Her figure wavered but did not warp with the wind as Leroth had intended that it should. He saw her begin to glow with a light that shifted between blindingly brilliant colors and settled at last on blue-white. For a moment, the outlining of her figure actually grew stronger.

Then mist rose up all around him.

Leroth choked as a damp tendril reached down his throat and rolled over, staring around him, looking for the attacking soldiers that surely the elfwoman meant for the mist to hide. Nothing answered his call, though, or his challenge, or the scraping of steel as he drew Acandra from her sheath. The silence remained damp and muffling, and when he tried to cut the mist with Acandra, all it did was flow back into place.

"What are you doing?" he screamed.

Elven laughter answered him and then the sound of galloping hooves. Leroth stood, shuddering as he listened to the inexplicably clear sound, trying to judge what direction it was coming from so that he could get out of the way of the riders.

It was coming from *above* him.

Leroth dove and heard sharp hooves cleave the air just above his head, followed by a whinny that sounded disappointed. He wanted to look up and utter some roaring defiance, but the sound of more horses followed, obliging him to keep his head bowed. When he looked up, he saw the riders, as ghostly as the elfwoman had been, wheeling to come back for a second run. They had black horses with silver hooves and eyes and manes and tails, dancing like patches of shadows and moonlight above the mist. The riders themselves had bows and silver-tipped arrows and staring eyes and high, piercing laughter.

Leroth swallowed. The Hunt had not ridden in so long that he wasn't sure if there were

any in Orlath who still knew how to resist them.

If they were come back, it was desperate that he return to the castle.

He staggered forward, then ducked as the Hunt swept over his head again. This time, though, the riders didn't return, and Leroth knelt in the mist, watching as they achieved height and speed and tore over the eastern reaches of Orlath, towards the ruins of Corlinth.

Old terror surged and sang in his veins. The tales of the Hunt were the very darkest of all.

He had to get home. Leroth repeated that to himself as he stood, as he voiced a prayer to Elle, as he managed at last to stagger forward.

His Gust magic warned him, and just as the mist dissipated, he met a party of riders out from the castle on some errand from his mother. They recognized him at once, of course, and put themselves at his disposal to get back to the castle. Leroth clung double behind another rider, since his legs still weren't strong enough to command a horse by themselves, and stared over his shoulder.

The mist was gone. The riders were gone. The elfwoman was gone. He might have imagined the whole thing.

But then something shone from the side, and Leroth said sharply, "Stop! Turn left!"

The lead soldier, eager to put himself at the disposal of Prince Leroth, sent a rider to retrieve the item and bring it to the Prince.

Leroth stared in silence at the silver-tipped arrow glinting in the soldier's hand, and shivered.

He thought he heard elven laughter inside his head.

Chapter Fifty-Two
Unweaving

"The teaching of ancient magic is never undertaken lightly."
—Rivendonian Proverb.

"You'll need to think of the Cycle."

Pheron sighed and closed his eyes. He had been doing nothing else for an hour, and still nothing had happened. He was coming to think that the People of the Blending couldn't teach him to use this Destiny-unweaving magic. It depended on interlocking the Cycle and elemental magic somehow in his mind, and every time he tried, he failed.

"Keep your attention on the Cycle."

Pheron restrained himself from opening his eyes or barking a retort, though it was hard. The undine the People of the Blending had sent as his teacher was far more impatient and outspoken than the fire-snake. She was also supposedly the best at teaching him, but there were no results so far.

"I heard that. You need to think of the Cycle. And Scarlet."

"Even if this does work, how will we know?" muttered Pheron, voicing a doubt that had been growing like pressure in his chest since they began this. "There's hardly anyone we can test

it on."

"The Darkworkers—"

Pheron opened his eyes, prohibition or not, and glared at the undine. "I don't want to take away Rangeforest's Destiny unless she expresses some desire for it," he said. "And taking away Haljen's Destiny might kill him." He had seen more and more of the older man's scars as their sojourn in the forest went on and thought that he would have died long ago if his Destiny hadn't preserved him.

"The red dragon is growing a Destiny, for some reason. You can practice on him." The undine glared back at him. She had sunk so that she was only a clear face in the stream. She kept altering her body like that, drawing more and more substance out of the river or sending it back as she liked. "And now, close your eyes, and concentrate on the Destiny and Scarlet."

Irritated, Pheron visualized the elaborate Cycle painting that Jienna had showed him but kept his eyes open and focused on the undine.

She shook her head, rising from the surface so that droplets of water scattered onto Pheron's knees. "Not that Cycle. The pure elemental Cycle."

"Why?"

"Do you want to learn to do this or not?"

Pheron's hand twitched, but he kept it from balling into a fist, and obediently closed his eyes and thought of the Cycle again. The undine was as bad as Jienna had been, trying to make him do things without explaining the reasons. He would give her one more chance, and then he would ask the People of the Blending for another teacher. He was coming to realize how desperately they needed him. If they wouldn't teach him with full knowledge of just what he was doing, then he could easily refuse to learn.

"That's better," said the undine, sounding pleased. "Now, call up a picture of the Scarlet in your mind and hold it there."

Pheron tried to do so. The image of a flame welled up, replacing the image of the Cycle, and the undine said, "No, no, no! Both of them at the same time. Then place the image of the flame in the center of the Cycle's ring. When you hold the images firmly enough, and then touch someone who wields the element you're thinking of, you unweave that person's Destiny."

"How does that work?" asked Pheron, thinking of a flame in the center of the Cycle and wondering if it would really achieve anything. It didn't feel very powerful.

The undine sounded willing enough to explain it, now that he was doing what she wanted him to do. "You make the images become real; you bind them to the Cycle. But because you stand outside Destiny, Destiny can't take them and weave them into its own patterns, which is what it could do with the thoughts of someone who was subject to it. Then you make the images grow, and when you touch the person who wields that element, that person moves into the center of the Cycle, away from being bound to it, and joins you."

"What powers it?"

"Your own magic."

Pheron's eyes popped open, and he glared at her. "How can I do that, when I don't have elemental magic?"

The undine opened her mouth, and then paused. "Oops," she said.

"*Oops*?"

The undine shook her head. "They told me that you didn't have elemental magic, but I didn't believe them," she said. "You really have none?"

Pheron called his clay and held out. "What do you call this?"

"Not very impressive."

Pheron nodded and dropped the clay ball on the ground, staring at it. "I don't have the magic necessary to do this," he said, rising to his feet. "I'm sorry, but you'll have to find some other way of stopping Emmeldra's prophecy. Perhaps I could call one of your people inside the castle, and that would work."

"No, it won't." The undine's voice was subdued as she swam in a circle, staring up at him. More of her body was visible now than at almost any time since they began, and Pheron thought it might be a sign of how upset she was. "The moment we came out of our element, we would become subject to the wards and either snapped out of the castle or made a part of the prophecy. Queen Aneron was clever. Even her enemies could become agents of the prophecies of her descendants." She was silent a moment more and swam another circle. Pheron stared at her, rubbing his stump, waiting. At last she said, "I will have to speak with the others. Someone might have foreseen this and prepared an alternative plan. Wait here for me."

She dove into the river, though really it was more as if she suddenly lost her substance to the water, and was gone. Pheron shook his head at her ripples and snorted. "Didn't foresee this? What else didn't they foresee?" he said, and turned away from the river.

"Trouble?" asked Rangeforest sweetly, pacing alongside him.

"It turned out that their plan requires the magic of the Cycle. I have to visualize the Cycle, and my sister's element inside it…" Pheron shook his head. "I don't think they really thought about what they were doing. I don't think I can learn to unweave Destiny at all. They just thought I could, and hoped I could, and started teaching me without thinking it all through."

"Ah." Rangeforest drew a deep breath, as if smelling the scents of sweet flowers. Pheron glanced sideways at her, suddenly wondering if it had been wise to tell her all that. Sure enough, when she turned back to him, the Darkworker wore a brilliant smile. "I take it that you won't be going to the castle and trying to stop your sister."

"Probably not, unless they can come up with something else."

"Then you will return with me to the Dark."

Pheron stared around the clearing. The Damned Spider had set up a web in the northern edge of the glade, and it was already studded with birds. He had to smile slightly. His friend did enjoy living in the forest.

Bloodsinger lay sleeping beyond that, with Haljen not far away. Even as Pheron watched, Haljen awoke with a small scream, and fell asleep again almost at once.

"Yes," he said at last. "But I don't really think there's a lieutenant of the Dark, anywhere, who would accept me."

Rangeforest clasped his hand, making him look at her. Her smile was bright with triumph. "There, you're wrong," she said. "Not all of them are as stupid as Jienna or narrow-sighted as Cloudshadow. And now that Cloudshadow has gone to the Light, more of them will think that your wounding of her was heroic." Her eyes narrowed for a moment, and her nostrils flared. Pheron, watching, thought that Bloodsinger wasn't the only one here with a resolve to kill Cloudshadow. Then the shade passed from Rangeforest's face, and she smiled gaily. "There is one I know of in particular, in Arvenna, who would be glad to have you."

"You spoke of Arvenna before," said Pheron, idly calling another ball of clay and tossing it. "What is there?"

"A refuge," answered Rangeforest, walking a few short feet away as though he had asked her to. "A haven. They were founded, as a Kingdom, to provide a refuge for the persecuted. And since the Dark is still the smaller of the groups, then they will be friendly to the Dark. And while

I won't tell you this lieutenant's name yet, I know that he will be very interested. We can go there. With Bloodsinger's wings, I think we can be there in a few hours." She held out her hands and clapped them expectantly.

Pheron looked at her blankly, then realized she was waiting for him to toss the ball of clay. With a faint smile, he lobbed it. Rangeforest caught it and tossed it back with a strength that made it smash against his palm. Pheron rolled his eyes and called another lump. "What makes you think that Bloodsinger would abandon his vengeance to go to Arvenna?"

"You could persuade him," said Rangeforest, catching the clay and tossing it back more gingerly this time. "You persuaded him to join you in your course to change the war when you thought it was still viable, after all." The smugness in her voice pricked Pheron, but he gritted his teeth and just threw the ball of clay back, instead of harsh words. "You can persuade him of anything. I've seen the way that he looks when you're speaking. I think you'll have another friend on your side soon, though perhaps not as one as devoted as the Damned Spider." She nodded to the Spider, who was enthusiastically wrapping up a squirrel that had blundered into its web. "You can make him come with you, and delay his vengeance for a while."

Pheron thought about it as they threw the ball of clay back and forth, and Rangeforest, as if she knew the way that her words were blossoming in his head, was quiet, and said nothing, letting them grow.

Could joining the Dark be the best thing after all? He would at least be safe from the hunters of the Light there. And he had come to pity Haljen, and to respect Rangeforest, knowing her for true-hearted to her cause, though not always trustworthy.

Then he remembered Corlinth again, and the look in Carent's eyes, and the eyes of the madwoman who had lost her child.

He shook his head slowly.

"You're thinking of Corlinth again, aren't you?" asked Rangeforest. "Always that cursed city. It was a mistake, and one that Cloudshadow will be chastised for. She shouldn't have struck so early, and revealed our hand so soon. Will that satisfy you?"

"One thing would satisfy me," said Pheron quietly.

"What's that?" Rangeforest leaned forward.

Pheron threw the ball of clay so that it hit her in the forehead. "If you could bring the dead of Corlinth to life, and give a woman I met back her child, and a little boy I met back his mother."

Rangeforest uttered a long hiss and stood back, wiping the clay from her brow. "You're too stubborn to learn anything," she snapped, and walked away.

Pheron sighed and moved towards Haljen and Bloodsinger, thinking of napping himself. Neither moved as he approached. He stood there for a moment, studying them, noting the muted glimmer that showed around Haljen's body, and the faint line that was beginning to shimmer into being above Bloodsinger's body. He was probably bound into the Destiny because of his vow of vengeance against Emmeldra and Cloudshadow, Pheron thought. It was probably meant to be part of some grand heroic story.

Pheron closed his eyes to keep from being sick. All his life he had heard those grand heroic stories, and somehow it was supposed to be all right because they had happened, though people died and of course the Dark and the Light both suffered the loss of much that was beautiful. At least there was drama, to comfort the survivors, and make them think that something important had happened.

He would give much to stop it.

He called up the Cycle of blended elements in his mind, Jienna's Cycle painting, and

glared at it, particularly at the blank space where Clay should have been. Why couldn't he have any magic at all, even that which was necessary to unweave Destiny?

He called a ball of clay in his hand, without opening his eyes, and deliberately imagined a ball of clay in the empty space. If only—

He paused, an odd sensation of writhing and twisting in his mind. Something seemed to stir and slither out of him, then lift claws and rend a delicate web. Pheron swayed slightly, fascinated.

A roar from Bloodsinger made him open his eyes, and stare.

The dragon shook his head as the glimmering aura around his body broke apart, drifting in all directions. He looked past Pheron, then stuck out his tongue and sniffed for him, at last looking in more or less the right place, though his right eye was staring squarely at a tree. "What are you doing?" he asked.

"I—I don't know." Pheron stared. But it was undeniable; the Destiny that had surrounded the dragon was gone. He looked at the ball of clay in his hand. It looked back at him, as innocent and round and simple as it had always been, unimpressive, without a hint of grandeur or danger.

But he had just done something.

"What was that?"

Two voices said the same words at once. One was Rangeforest's, from behind him. The other was the undine's, as she lifted her head from the water again.

"I don't know," said Pheron. He looked at the undine, since Rangeforest was probably still irritated with him. "I thought of the Cycle with the blended elements in their places, and called the ball of clay, and then put the image of one in the blank place."

The undine blinked, then held out her hand. A small curl of water appeared in the center of it, glowing like a flame, and held in place as though by the sides of a cup. "Bring the clay here, and touch it to the water."

Pheron did so. There was a slight, shivering motion, and the water vanished.

The undine looked at it for a moment, then looked up at him. "I don't understand it," she murmured. "But if I had to guess, I would say that the clay, which isn't supposed to be in that part of the Cycle, is capable of destroying a small part of the Cycle if you imagine it in that place that another, unknown element is supposed to occupy."

Rangeforest promptly closed her eyes and held out her hand. Nothing appeared, and nothing happened. "It doesn't work for me," she said in disappointment, opening her eyes.

"Of course not, or something would have happened long ago," said the undine. She looked again at the clay ball in Pheron's hand, and in her eyes were respect and fear. "Of all the people who have imagined Clay in that place in the Cycle, none has ever had the power of calling it. I think somehow that your power to summon clay into the physical world combines with the fact that Clay is *not* supposed to be there, and rips the Cycle apart, at least in that particular place and time. And there is no denying that the dragon has lost what little Destiny he gathered."

"Then I will go to the castle?"

"There is no reason why not," said the undine, lifting her gaze to his face. "No one can take that clay away from you, and no one can stop you thinking of the Cycle with Clay in its appointed place. Combine them, and you can unweave your sister's Destiny."

Pheron nodded sharply, and then turned and looked at Bloodsinger. "Are you still willing to bear me to the castle?"

The dragon opened his jaws, lazily spilling his tongue in a gesture of amusement, and said, "I was waiting only for you to master this unweaving."

Pheron nodded firmly once or twice, hoping it would help settle the conflicting emotions within him. He was not really sure how to feel.

For the first time in his life, he was dangerous.

Chapter Fifty-Three
Unweaving the Politics

"Proclaiming an heir to the throne is not a simple business in any of the kingdoms. Of course the child must be the blood heir of the Queen or King then ruling, but he or she should also be strong in the war against the Dark, and possessed of elemental magic, and a Destiny that will not kill him or her before assumption of the throne. And, of course, it goes almost without saying that he or she should have a worthy character."

—From The Books of Royalty.

Hanir sighed and rubbed his head. His mother had been attempting to explain things to him for the last hour, and he still didn't feel really straight on most of it.

"So you proclaimed Leroth Heir," he said, returning to one thing he was sure of.

"Something I did without thinking matters through fully," said his mother quickly. She looked away, which gesture Hanir thought did not befit a Queen, and brushed a strand of her golden hair across her eyes. "I regret it, and of course I will rescind the declaration, now that he has confessed his fault and gone to make redemption and plead in his penitence before Elle."

Hanir nodded slowly. "But you don't think that my failures in the mountains are sufficient cause for me to give up claim to the throne?"

"What failures?" Queen Annilda looked back at him, and spoke with a voice that he thought she was keeping bright and cheerful by force. "You don't know that Prince Lightflower is dead. As Emmeldra says, it is far more likely that he is held captive by the agents of the Dark, and powerful ones at that. You did the best you could, staying alive and fulfilling your Destiny."

"And the tales of their taking Destiny?"

Queen Annilda smiled and flipped a hand in a dismissive gesture. Hanir let out a slow breath. Now was not the time to get angry at his mother. She was hardly the only one who had dismissed his warning against the People of the Blending as the lies of clever Dark agents.

Of course, the fact that she wasn't the only one just made his anger boil hotter.

"Nothing can take Destiny from us," said Annilda, rising to her feet and pacing to the window. They sat in her high private chambers, where she could always look down on the Lilitha Ocean that was her element, and the sea breeze could whisper and sing in her hair. "We were given into the protection and care and dominion of Destiny and the Cycle and Elle forever, when Queen Aneron declared, in the most famous prophecy of all, that her line was linked to the soil of Orlath."

The words were the same that Hanir had heard from childhood, and before he went on that cursed journey he would have allowed them to soothe him. But now, he couldn't. Words that he had long thought about, but never would have spoken before, popped from his mouth. "What

about Pheron?"

The Queen started as if he had jabbed her in the back with a rod. She glanced at him over her shoulder, the blue glow of her Azure magic starting up around her. Hanir heard the waves below roar in response and guessed she was riding them, which might account for some of the distant look in her eyes. "What about him?" she asked.

"He has no Destiny," said Hanir. "No elemental magic."

"That is true," said Annilda. "And that is the reason that he could betray us, and the reason that I am willing to let our new allies have him."

Hanir drew a careful breath and didn't shout what he thought about that. "But he is also of the blood of Queen Aneron. Shouldn't he have been under the rule of Destiny and the Cycle and Elle as well? And what does it mean that he is not?"

Annilda sighed, a sound like a doe calling a fawn. She paced across the room and stood in front of him, head bowed. Hanir looked up to meet her eyes and saw there remnants of an old shadow.

"I asked myself many questions like that, when he was born," said Annilda. "It seemed impossible. It seemed as though I had failed somehow. But I at last came to a conclusion that satisfied me."

"What?" Hanir asked eagerly. He had never heard his mother speak about their failed brother before. Indeed, for most of his life Hanir had hardly thought of Pheron. He was just there, a shadow that wasn't talked about, like the turning of their mother's sister and husband to the Dark.

"It doesn't matter." Annilda shrugged her shoulders. "I have three beautiful children who are as strong in their Destiny and their magic as I could wish." She graced Hanir with a smile. "And all of them have won great victories. There is no reason to think of Pheron, and when the dragons take him, then they will have taken a problem off our hands. That is all." She looked back towards the window. "I wish to spend some time communing with the sea. If you will take your leave, my son and Heir?"

Hanir stood and made his way to the door, slowly, each leg feeling as if it were carved of stone. He turned around before he left and said, "Why didn't you make Emmeldra the Heir?"

His mother still watched the waves as she said, "I fear her Destiny will kill her before she could take the throne."

Hanir bowed and left.

His passage led him above the main courtyard, and there he stood for a moment, watching the dragon, Cloudshadow, lie there and stretch her wings to the sun. The castle's children would sidle up to her, giggling, and then run away again. Cloudshadow showed no sign of attacking them. Indeed, from the way that her eyes fixed on the sun, she might be praying to the Light.

Might be.

Hanir did not trust her and did not at all think that his sister's "conversion" of the dragons was successful. Of course, that could be because of the general foreboding that hung in his heart.

He turned away from the dragon and continued along the walkway, which was the upper way to his rooms. He felt the need to be alone and ponder some of what he had learned, the thoughts that were leaping and slamming against the walls of his mind like kittens confined for too long in one room.

Most of them, for no reason that he could discern—and that in itself inspired some suspicions that he didn't like—centered around Pheron.

He thought it was wrong to give their brother to the dragons. He had seen the wooden

torture rack in Cloudshadow's cave, and hadn't liked the look of it.

But, on the other hand, why not? The line of Aneron knew from the time they could learn that they might have to sacrifice their lives for the good of the kingdom. Some of them died in battle. Some of them married people they didn't love, for the sake of securing alliances with the other Kingdoms. Their lives were forfeit, the price for the grandeur of their Destiny. The ruler of all was the servant of all.

Besides, Pheron owed something to the kingdom. Their mother had kept him around for years, even though he had no apparent use. He ate but didn't do anything. He had a little magic, but nothing that did anything useful. None of the royalty of the other Kingdoms would have married him. He didn't even have the decency to leave the castle and live a quiet life somewhere else but hung around the court like a plague. Their mother was owed something for all those long years of feeding and taking care of him. She couldn't have his loyalty, so she should have what she could buy with his life.

Except…

That those thoughts felt wrong.

Hanir was in the privacy of his room now, and he swore and kicked the door shut, flopping down on his bed and staring at the ceiling.

His sister's conversion of the dragons was a great victory. Save for the gryphons, who were allied to the Light, the Dark ruled the air. The addition of the dragons to their defenses would mean that the Light could send messages faster and transport troops a great distance, as well as essentially having flying weapons at their disposal. Hanir could see the advantages of that all too well.

But…

He still didn't think that the conversion of the dragons was real or ultimately useful, and he didn't think that any price the Light could pay for their loyalty would be enough to keep them.

Hanir closed his eyes and tried to sleep, but the noise of the celebration was enough to keep him awake. The people crowded inside the castle's walls, including all the refugees who had fled from the fall of Ozue and Corlinth, were still celebrating the conversion of the dragons to the Light. Emmeldra was being feasted as a heroine and congratulated on her bold resolve to go and find her husband-to-be.

It wasn't that he felt jealous, Hanir told himself, because he didn't. He felt lonely. He couldn't touch his twin's mind any more. The dragon cave had been their last contact, and that had been strained. Their thinking had parted so radically on the issue of dragons that it was as if they could never share anything again. Hanir still felt Emmeldra thinking of him, but it was impatient and tinged with doubt. She really didn't know if he was who he said he was, and sometimes she thought that he had left Lightflower behind on purpose, so unwilling was she to countenance the truth of the People of the Blending.

"They were real," Hanir whispered. "I know it. They are a threat, and we need to prepare to meet them."

How, though, if no one else even believed the threat was real?

Hanir took a few deep breaths and drew Ulua, holding the sword up in front of his eyes. Her blade shimmered with magical flames as he turned it back and forth, and he found his confidence returning. Had not the Princess Zendrana of Arvenna ridden to the aid of the unicorns even when all the Kingdoms thought them gone? She had, and since then the unicorns had been staunch allies of the Light and lovers and protectors of the royal lines. Hanir wouldn't let the weakness of others delay him from doing what he knew was right. He would fight the People of

the Blending if no one else would.

He still had his duty.

On other things, of course, his mind was not so clear. He found his thoughts still picking round and round the problem of Pheron, and sighed as he put Ulua away. He couldn't decide what was right and what was not. Pheron was surely owed some protection, as were even the weakest and closest to Destinyless of the peasants of the realm, but he had apparently turned to the Dark. Hanir wasn't sure if that meant Pheron was an enemy and had to be treated as such, or pitied and protected because of his undoubted motives: jealousy and self-pity.

"What's really bothering me," Hanir decided aloud, "is the torture. I will fight Pheron if he tries anything, kill him if need be, but I won't allow him to be tortured to death."

That decided, he did feel better, and he drifted off to sleep feeling righteous.

Chapter Fifty-Four
In Passing

"It is sights in passing that tell us the most about ourselves."
—Klessa of the Nine Wonders, when she earned the Ninth Wonder.

"The wind's whipping my hair in my eyes."

Pheron was beginning to be grateful that he had slept as Bloodsinger brought them to the forest and wondering why he hadn't been lucky enough to fall asleep on this ride.

"You were the one who chose to come," he said shortly. "Bloodsinger offered to let you walk away and go to Arvenna. Why did you come? It's not as though you'll be able to enter the castle."

Haljen, who clung behind him, made a frightened squeaking noise. Pheron ignored him. He didn't share the other man's obvious wariness of getting Rangeforest angry, at least not anymore. The Lightning mage had done nothing but complain since they lifted from the forest. If it wasn't the wind whipping her hair in her eyes, it was the Damned Spider poking her, or Pheron himself holding on too tightly. Something was always wrong.

Rangeforest twisted to glare at him. "How could I walk to Arvenna? Do you have any conception of how far it is?"

"No, since you still wouldn't tell me where this lieutenant was when I asked."

"You could have been spying."

"You can't have it both ways," said Pheron. "Either I'm a spy for the Light, or I'm someone who's potentially useful whom you want to recruit for the Dark. And when I asked, I didn't want to know, particularly. I was simply trying to find something interesting to talk about."

Rangeforest turned forward in a huff. Pheron glared at her back.

He had been sure that Bloodsinger would bear him and the Damned Spider to the castle, and then leave him there, or at best wait for the moment when the wards broke and he could be of some help. He had pictured Rangeforest and Haljen seeking Arvenna, or remaining in the forest clearing, or doing something else that would benefit the Dark both of them still claimed to serve.

He hadn't pictured sharing a dragon's back with them for several hundred miles and at least a day in the air, while Rangeforest complained about the consequences of a choice she'd made herself. In fact, she'd not only made it herself but made it in the face of his reasoned suggestions, even pleading, that she go somewhere else.

Perhaps that was part of the reason she'd made it, in fact.

Pheron sighed and turned his head to look down at the grass. They were passing over the Corlirin, at last, after hours of flying over trees. It wasn't much more interesting to look at, but sometimes he saw horses or riders, and once they had even seen another dragon flying at a distance. And there were greater distances to see an enemy coming in from.

And other things.

Pheron lifted his gaze, thinking he recognized the curve of the Plains below, and saw the high walls of what had been the city of Corlinth.

He watched silently, trying to forget that the dragon he rode had helped burn the buildings and fly the wounded Dragon Queen back to her own cave. There were too many ironies in that. He found himself wondering if Carent and Lissa's mother and the old Crop mage and the others had made it to the walls of the castle, after all, or if something had happened to them on the way. Dark agents, perhaps.

"I felt the same way," said Haljen, his voice almost neutral but holding something that Pheron recognized as a plea to let him continue. He had heard the same thing from his mother often enough, when she started to tell some tale of her childhood during the last war with the Dark and then looked around to see if anyone wanted to hear it.

"Yes?" he asked.

"I felt the same way when the last war started," said Haljen. "It's one thing to hear about the ravages of war in the history-tales, and another to see them."

Pheron mused for a moment, but couldn't think of anything to add to that, so he said simply, "Yes."

"I saw a village when the filifernai were done with it," Haljen went on. "It was far from the worst thing I saw, but it was the first, and that always sticks in your mind."

Pheron refrained from replying that he would be quite happy if he never saw another thing like Corlinth, if it was his only and not his first. "What did the filifernai do?"

"You don't know?"

"No," said Pheron. "I had never heard of them before I saw some in Corlinth."

"Well," said Haljen, "I suppose not. They're kin to the elves, and the elves don't like to talk about them. They went into the center of the village and did a dance. The older villagers and the children were drawn into the dance and danced to death. The others had their throats whipped out. The bodies were left everywhere, since no one but the ravens came along to clean up behind them."

"The filifernai don't eat them, then?"

Haljen spoke too quickly. "No. What gave you that idea?"

Pheron shook his head, not sure if he believed the other man but willing to let it pass. "Something in the eyes," he said. "And something in the way that one of them struck at my throat, I suppose."

Haljen's arms tightened around his waist for a moment. Since his voice was so flat, that was the only sign that Pheron had that what he said next mattered to him. "One of them attacked you?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I don't know. It stared at me, and then it danced, and then it attacked me. I still don't know why. I was lucky enough that someone else managed to restrain it."

Haljen said nothing.

"Does it mean something?" asked Pheron.

Haljen was still silent. Rangeforest said, "It does, but it's another of those things that you'd have to come to the Dark to learn." Her voice was taunting.

Pheron snorted. "I wouldn't convert just to learn why something wanted to kill me. I've got enough people who want to kill me for reasons I do understand."

They flew in silence after that. Or, at least, partial silence. Pheron began to think that Bloodsinger was sniffing the air, and when he leaned past Rangeforest and looked ahead, he saw it was true. The red dragon's tongue flickered out, and he turned his head, staring at the ground that passed under the heavy beat of his wings. He hadn't done that before. He had stared straight ahead, as if he could see the castle from here.

"What is it?" Pheron asked.

A chattering noise made him look down. The Damned Spider, which had crouched beside him for most of the ride, was trying to get into his lap.

Rangeforest stiffened where his arm encircled her. "Something bad," she said softly.

"Yes," said Haljen. "Can't you feel it?" His voice was muffled, but full of a heavy, still dread.

Pheron sighed. Sometimes not being attached to the Cycle and Destiny really did hurt him. "No, I can't," he said. "Did something happen near here?" He glanced back, but Haljen's head already hid the walls of Corlinth, so fast were they moving.

"Very near," said Bloodsinger, his voice surging and rumbling in his scales. Their forward motion slowed for the first time since they'd left the clearing, and he tilted his wings. "I'm going into a circle. I need to look at the Plains for a moment, before I approach this."

"What does he mean?" Pheron asked.

Haljen still said nothing, and Bloodsinger, occupied with entering his wheeling circle, didn't either. But Rangeforest did reply, and without a hint of sharpness in her voice. "One of his kin died," she said. "And the Light did something they shouldn't have."

"I think they've done a lot of that."

"Not like this."

Bloodsinger flew in a circle for far shorter a time than Pheron thought he would, gazing at the ground. Then he turned and flew west instead of east, aiming for the Terrana.

Pheron saw a distant flash of blue, easily mistaken for a reflection from the river at first. But then he saw how large it was, and how it spread across the ground, and how it was a richer blue than anything found in the sky.

And how still it was.

Bloodsinger winged hard as he came in above it, settling into another circle, and Pheron had some time to gaze down and take in the damage before they approached.

The blue dragon on the ground was easy enough to recognize. It was Stormfleet, who had breathed water into the streets of Corlinth. He lay with wings stretched out, his belly upward, staring at the sky with eyes that would never truly see anything again.

Someone had plunged stakes through his wings, many of them, as sharp as harpoons. They bound his wings to the ground so thoroughly that even the strong wind couldn't do much more than ruffle the leather. Pheron didn't think a dragon with wings like that would ever have

been able to fly again.

Something had cut open his belly—in fact, had slit the underside of his body from just above the tail to the throat. Organs had been pulled out and laid neatly beside the body, most still attached by thick tendrils of flesh and muscle. Blood was everywhere, and where it had trickled the grass was scorched. A thick, awful smell, like piles of burning dung, rose to Pheron's nostrils, and he shut his eyes, partially to block out the gore and partially to deny that it had happened.

Bloodsinger winged down, and then they landed. Pheron still didn't open his eyes. He felt Rangeforest slip from Bloodsinger's back, and then the dragon walked closer. Pheron could tell they were going closer not only from the motion, but because the smell was getting worse.

He opened his eyes at last, because he had to face it, and saw Rangeforest standing beside Stormfleet, caressing a motionless wing. Bloodsinger stood above the corpse, staring at it with a motionlessness that made Pheron think he had no expression in his eyes at all. Haljen slipped down from behind him, though with difficulty, and he approached the corpse slowly, stopping by the tail and bowing his head.

The silence endured and stretched, until Pheron was ready to scream to make it stop. The Damned Spider clung beside him, not chattering, just staring.

Then Bloodsinger raised his head and roared.

The sound was deep and musical, and Pheron thought it must travel the length of the Plains. The drums and cymbals in it were especially powerful. Bloodsinger stood listening to the echoes, and then drew breath, slowly, so that his sides bulged out and Pheron's legs almost lost their grips, and then roared again.

And then, a third time, when the echoes of that had died away.

Finally, he approached and breathed, a gentle, licking flame that caught almost at once on Stormfleet's blood. Pheron wondered hazily if that burned faster. He'd never known.

Flames raced the length of the dragon's body very quickly. Rangeforest and Haljen moved backward, but slowly, as if they knew the fire would only go to a certain point and not hurt them. And it did seem to stop with Stormfleet's body. It outlined him, shining with a radiant, fierce glow, but didn't burn the grass. It seemed to turn inward and consume only the dragon alone.

As Pheron watched the fire burn, he felt someone climb up on Bloodsinger's back beside him. He turned and saw Rangeforest staring at him, the gold flecks in her eyes shining with fervor again.

"Can you deny the Light has done wrong?" she asked, sweeping her hand at the pyre. "Or will you say that it was all he deserved, for drowning Corlinth?"

"Neither," said Pheron quietly.

"Well, then?"

"I don't think either was right," said Pheron, looking back at the pyre and thinking of Stormfleet's staked wings and wondering if what he had been told in the past was true, that dragons committed suicide if they could not fly. If it was, his killers had not left him the freedom to do that. "Not what they did, and not what he did."

"You can't do that."

"Do what?"

"Say things like that. You have no idea what this means, what the Light has declared with this obscene ritual."

"So tell me," said Pheron quietly, watching the flames hiss and dance. For a moment, he almost thought he saw a blue heart rising in them, uncoiling into the shape of a blue dragon, but

he blinked and it was gone. The mind would play fancies when it wished, he thought. "What does it mean?"

"It means that they want to destroy the Dark utterly and completely. The last time they staked dragons was during the war in Queen Aneron's time."

Everything comes back to her, doesn't it? Pheron wished for a moment he could have known his ancestress, if only because everyone else seemed to place such importance on her. "But Dragons were not part of the Dark," he said aloud.

"They want to destroy everything outside the Light now," said Rangeforest. "Dark or not." She nodded to the Damned Spider, who had moved forward a little as if to get a better view of the pyre. "Even Deathweaver spiders, though they separated from the goblins a long time ago and the Light hasn't hunted them since. There can't be any neutrals, Pheron. You're on the same side as us now."

Pheron looked at her. "If they try to kill me or the Damned Spider, then I'll fight back," he said. "But I don't see the point in deciding that I'm against them before they've done anything to me."

"They staked Stormfleet!"

"And I wish he were alive," said Pheron and was astonished to feel tears sting his eyes. *Why?* He blinked them away and sighed with relief when no more followed them. "And I wish all the people in Corlinth were still alive, too. And Bloodsinger's hatchling. And my mother's sister and husband. And, if it helps, all the people who have ever died in any war of the Dark and Light since the world began. But, as you pointed out to me, wishing doesn't bring the dead back. Nothing can bring the dead back. And if you call the people who died in Corlinth casualties of war, why don't you think of Stormfleet the same way?"

Rangeforest turned her back on him.

Pheron watched the flames burn down to nothing, leaving not even bones behind. Then Haljen climbed back up, and Rangeforest took her place in front of him. Bloodsinger stood there for a moment longer, gazing, as if he could see something none of the humans could.

For that matter, Pheron noted, the Damned Spider looked for a while longer before returning to his side.

Bloodsinger then turned and ran hard across the grass. His wings unhinged and clapped, and then he began to lift, turning against the wind, riding it. There was a moment when Pheron was sure that he was going to turn back towards the Rashars, perhaps to rouse his people to vengeance.

But then he turned and began flying towards the coast and the castle of Orlath once again.

"What are you doing?" asked Rangeforest. "Wouldn't it be better to make for Arvenna? We need to report this." She turned around to face Pheron this time. "And it would mean telling you, or killing you, but we need to go to Arvenna now. We must. The Dark needs to know just how far the Light has taken its attack."

"They will know soon enough," said Bloodsinger. "I have smelled pegasi several times now. They will have seen Stormfleet's body, and they will have smelled the smoke of the burning. Lord Carleon will know soon enough."

"But we must turn."

"No. Pheron is right. We can't bring back the dead. Our responsibility is to go on and make sure that we can do something to stop the Light. And striking at their prophecy sounds like a good idea to me, for Stormfleet as well as my hatchling."

Rangeforest turned around again. "Why did you have to say that?" she hissed to Pheron.

"I didn't know that it would persuade him," said Pheron.

Rangeforest turned stiffly forward again.

"You just don't understand," Haljen whispered miserably against his back. "You don't understand how important this is to the Dark."

"No," said Pheron. "I don't. Because no one will tell me anything." He bit his lip, hearing the anger in his voice, and managed to modulate it to mere firmness. "I wasn't raised in the Dark, and I didn't believe in the tales of the Light when I was being told them. So, forgive me for not understanding. But if you won't tell me anything, then I can only do things based on what I know. And I'm going to the castle and trying to stop Emmeldra, because it's a good idea and I have the ability to do so."

"You don't care about the Cycle at all, do you?" asked Rangeforest.

"I spend a great deal of time caring about it, and wishing that I had elemental magic," Pheron replied.

"That's not what I meant," said Rangeforest. "It doesn't matter to you the way that it matters to us. You don't think about the wars of Dark and Light the same way."

Pheron only shrugged, unsure of what she meant.

She twisted to look back at him, remained staring for a moment, and then, as if she had seen too much, looked ahead again.

Pheron frowned at her back. Why was there fear in her eyes?

...to be concluded in the June 2004 issue of Deep Magic

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